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GOLD MEDAL BOOK

RICHARD FOSTER

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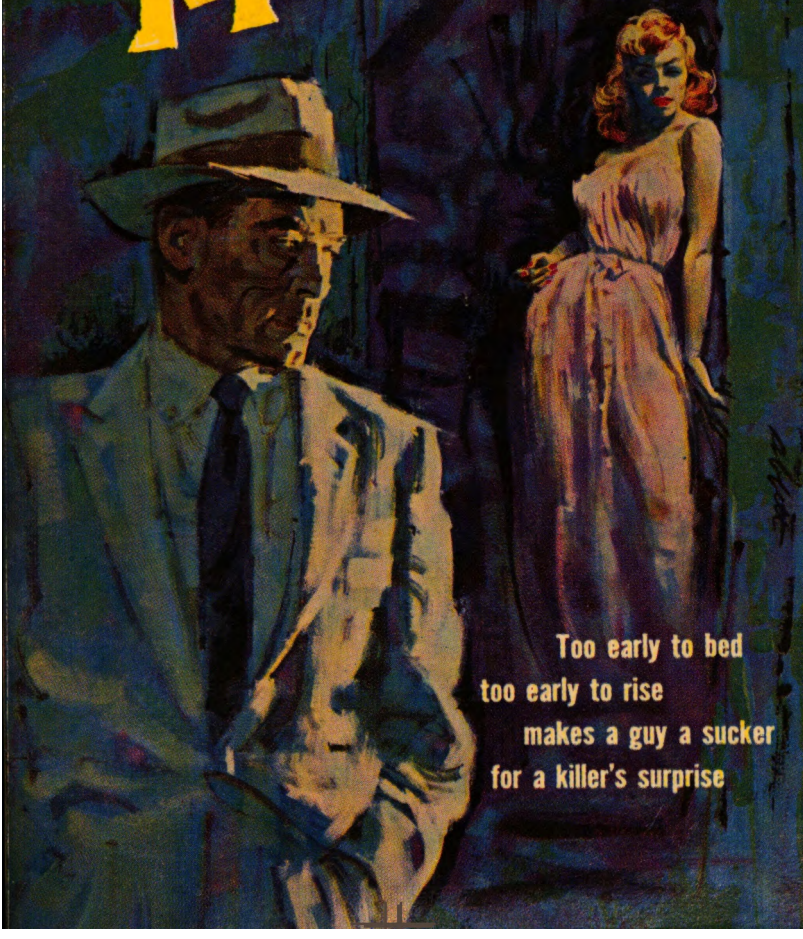
TOO LATE FOR MOURNING



Too early to bed
too early to rise
makes a guy a sucker
for a killer's surprise

BOOKS N THINGS
LONG BEACH, WA

"LAY OFF, WISE GUY . . ."

Pete Draco lay off a juicy case? Not me, brother. I'd heard threats before and I was used to them. But the hoods out on fat Phil Driscoll's heavily-guarded island estate wouldn't stop at threats. They wouldn't stop at anything to keep me from investigating the death of Frank Thorney.

I might have been able to handle Driscoll if Thorney's widow had minded her own business. The old boy was still warm from the hands of his murderer, but that didn't stop his wife from chasing me all to hell and gone over southern Florida.

And I was too busy handling both sides of this deal to notice what was going on behind me—and the neat, insidious frame that was being built just for me.

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too late for mourning

An Original Gold Medal Novel by

RICHARD FOSTER

Gold Medal Books

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For Lisa

the girl in my dreams—and in my life.

CHAPTER 1

IT WAS a nice way to make a living. I was at Hialeah Park in Miami. The flamingoes were lovely, the horses were beautiful and the pari-mutuel machines were friendly. I hit the daily double for a little more than two hundred dollars plus a six bucks across the board on the winner of the second race, getting me off to a three-hundred-dollar start. I had another winner in the fourth race and he was good for roughly another hundred dollars. In between races, I worked.

Maybe I'd better explain. The name is Draco. Pete Draco. I'm a private detective. License number 0659-7421. I have an office at Undercover, Inc., at 27th Street and Collins Avenue in Miami Beach. It's a way of making a more or less honest buck. I'll never get rich at it, but I make enough to support the office, a pretty nice apartment above it, a well-stocked bar and a white Cadillac. What more could I ask?

I really was working that day at Hialeah. I'd been hired by Sam West of the Westmore Stables three days before. There was some kind of leak out of his stables and he wanted to know what it was. Every time he decided that one of his horses was going all out to win, a lot of strange money went down on the horse through the bookies as well as at the track. But if he had a horse entered just for the exercise, the money stayed away. Somebody was reading his mind—or somebody who knew his mind was talking. He wanted to know just what it was.

It was between the fifth and sixth race on that fourth day that I finally found something. I was over at the

stable. One of the Westmore horses, Bay King, had just won the fifth. There had been a lot of money on him —some of it mine. The trainer and groom were cooling out the horse and I wandered into Bay King's empty stall. I wasn't looking for anything special—I'd already been through the stalls several times—but was just wandering around hoping that I'd get an idea. I was leaning up against the feed box, idly kicking the end of the stall. Then my toe hit something that felt different than the boards I'd been kicking.

I leaned down and brushed away the straw and there it was. A neat little thing, no larger than a cigarette package, fixed to the bottom of the feed box right at floor level and then covered with straw. But small as it was, it was still large enough to contain a microphone and a power pack so that it could pick up conversation from several yards away and broadcast it to someone with a radio tuned to its wave length. I left it where it was and kicked the straw back over it. Then I went upstairs to the Westmore box.

Sam West was sitting there with his wife and a group of friends. I nodded to him and he left the box. We went to the clubhouse bar and took a table over in a corner. I told him what I'd discovered. He swore heavily.

"Who do you think did it?" he asked.

"There's no way of telling or of tracing it," I said, "but it's probably a group of gamblers. And there may be more to it than the bug I found in the stall."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if they bugged the stall, they may have bugged your home and tapped your phone and done the same thing to other owners. I doubt if they'd pick on just you."

"They might," Sam West said. "It might be somebody out to get me. I can't think they'd have the nerve to try it on the scale you mention. Anyway, thanks, Draco. I'll mail you a check."

"What are you going to do?" I asked curiously.

"Rip that thing out of the stall and have my phone checked," he said. "Then I'll be sure we keep our eyes open."

"Why not go to the cops with it?"

He shook his head. "It's just not done that way. We can handle any group of tin-horn gamblers ourselves. We've got our own agency, the Thoroughbred Racing Protective Bureau."

"Okay," I said, and I left it at that. I left the bar and went out to see what was going on. There was still one race left but I decided to start for Miami Beach and avoid the last-minute traffic. I got my car, drove out of the park and headed east on 79th Street. A few other people obviously had the same idea and traffic was moderate.

At Grapeland Boulevard I turned right and drove south until I hit 20th Street in Miami. I turned left and headed toward the Bay. Then I went down Biscayne Boulevard, crossed the MacArthur Causeway to the Beach and headed north. When I reached 27th and Collins, I made a U-turn and parked in front of my place. I went into the office and called my answering service. There were no messages.

I had just replaced the receiver when the door opened and they came in. Two men. I had never seen them before, but I had seen their kind many times. Their expensive clothes were just a little too tight and bulged slightly beneath the left arm. There were always plenty like them in Southern Florida. The only thing I couldn't figure was why they were coming to see me.

"Yes?" I said.

"A fancy-looking joint," the first man said. He closed the door behind him. "These private dicks must have a pretty good racket."

"Yeah," said the second man.

"Too bad we don't have a racket like it," the first one said.

The two of them hadn't looked anywhere except at me since they entered and I didn't like it. The expressions on both of them were blank, like a tree surgeon looking over a tree to see which limb to hack off. I reached over and casually opened the drawer in which I kept my guns.

"Hold it," the first man said sharply. He'd produced a gun. "Keep your hands where I can see them. Now

stand up slowly and move away from the desk. Make it easy on yourself, buster."

I obeyed. There wasn't anything else to do under the circumstances. I cast a lingering, loving glance at the two guns and moved away from them.

"What's this all about?" I asked.

"He wants to know what it's all about," the first one said. "You think maybe we ought to show him?"

"Yeah," the second man said. He wasn't very wordy. He reached into his pocket and brought out a blackjack with a long leather thong. He reached into another pocket and produced his handkerchief. He wrapped it carefully around the blackjack. I knew what that was for. It wouldn't stop the blackjack from hurting, but it would keep it from leaving marks. He looked at me as if he were searching for a soft spot, then moved towards me the way a cat approaches a mouse.

"Wait a minute," I said. "There must be some mistake."

"No mistake, chum," the first man said. He licked his dry lips. "You're a shamus named Draco. We're a couple of guys who have come along to teach you something. Right?"

"Yeah," the second man said and swung the blackjack.

I ducked the first swing and threw a right. I was only partly lucky. I hit him high on the cheek and it jarred him—but not enough. Before I could recover from the swing, he tapped the blackjack lovingly along the side of my head and the room reeled. I staggered over against the desk and then he swung a backhand that caught me on the other side of the head. This time I went down.

He moved in swiftly. He hit me once across the jaw which made me even more groggy. Then he switched his attention to my rib cage. The blackjack thwacked across my ribs again and again, and every time it hurt like hell. I knew what he was doing—trying to give me bruises that I'd remember for several days. I tried to kick him but I couldn't focus too well and I missed.

To pay me for that, he slashed the blackjack across my belly, low down.

Finally, he quit. I wasn't sure that he had for a minute; it was difficult to tell the difference between a new blow and one that had landed before. Then I became aware that the first man had walked over and was grinning down at me. It wasn't much of a grin but it gave the impression that he was enjoying the whole thing.

"You get the idea, chum?" he asked. "This was only what you might call a sample. We got lots more where this came from. Now, you want to be a nice boy and not get hurt all you have to do is take yourself a vacation. Go away somewhere for a few weeks for your health. Get the idea?"

I suggested what he could do.

"He talks like a real big man, don't he?" he said. He shifted his weight and the point of his shoe struck me in the hip. "Think it over, chum. Take that vacation—or we'll be back to see you. So long, sucker."

A moment later I heard the office door slam shut. After that I lay on the floor for maybe a half hour. My head was full of buzzing sounds and every time I took a breath it felt as if someone was shoving a knife into me. But after a half hour it began to ease off. Not much, but enough.

I got to my feet. That hurt a little more, but the man with the blackjack had been an artist; he hadn't broken anything, but he'd made it possible for me to remember him. I went slowly up the stairs to my apartment. When I got there, I stripped off my clothes, dropping them as they came off, and went into the bathroom. I'd been right about him being an artist. There wasn't a sign of a mark on me. I turned on the hot water in the shower and stepped into it. After a few minutes, I began to feel better.

I came out of the shower and began to get dressed. On the way home from the track I'd promised myself that I'd have dinner out and I wasn't going to let a polite beating interfere with it. When I was dressed, I went downstairs and got into the Cadillac. I made

another U-turn and headed north.

When I reached the Hapsburg Hotel, I drove up the ramp and turned the car over to one of the boys. I went in. The lobby of the Hapsburg, like most of the Beach hotels, looked slightly like a Turkish harem palace. Most of the women sitting around in the lobby looked as if they might be some of the older wives, grown fat in service.

I went into the main bar and climbed on a stool like a little man. It was still pretty early and there weren't many people in the bar. There were a few people sitting at the tables and two women and a man were at the bar across from me.

The Hapsburg bar is a circular one and on top of the center section there's a mechanical hula girl who keeps tossing her hips all night. It's sent many a drunk out talking to himself. At night there are three bartenders on duty, but my favorite is Buck Farrell. He was talking to the two women and the man when I came in, but he left them and brought over a bottle of Seagram's VO. He poured a shot on the rocks and put it in front of me.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," I answered. I put the first drink down fast and he poured another one.

"Did I tell you," he asked, "about the Martian who saw the roofs covered with TV antennas and wanted to meet the pretty girls who were sunbathing?"

"You did," I told him solemnly. "At least twice."

"Well, you win a few, lose a few," he said with a grin. "Did you get a load of all the rocks?"

I looked at the people on the other side of the bar. It was easy to see what he was talking about. One of them was an attractive woman of about forty with bluish-gray hair. She was wearing a platinum mink jacket and enough jewelry to put Cartier's in business. Next to her was a prosperous-looking man of about sixty-five. On the other side of him there was a girl in her early twenties who was really a knockout. She wasn't wearing any jewelry and she didn't need any; that would have been gilding the lily.

"Who are they?" I asked Buck.

"Mr. and Mrs. Frank Thorney from New York. They're staying here in the hotel and she's giving all the old broads in the place both barrels. She wears a different bunch of rocks every night and the other old broads are turning green. She's also on the make—if you're interested."

I'd already noticed her glancing at me occasionally. "You left something out, Buck," I said gently.

"What?" he asked innocently. "Her husband? He doesn't seem to pay much attention. I guess she keeps him worn out buying all that ice."

"I was referring to the other jewel," I said.

He grinned. "Oh, her. I didn't know you'd be interested." He was a liar and knew it. "Her name is Susan Siena. Miss, I guess. She's staying here, too."

"With them?"

"No, but they've picked up an acquaintance with her. I think they're throwing some kind of dinner party tonight in the Bamboo Room. Pretty nice, huh?"

"The dinner party?" I asked.

"The doll," he said.

"Nice," I agreed. I looked around the bar and noticed a man sitting at one of the tables with two other men. He was doing card tricks. "What goes on over there?" I asked.

"A magician," Buck said. "They just hired him. He's supposed to work in here during the cocktail hours, just drifting from table to table."

"Good?"

"Yeah, he's pretty good, but no better than you are." This was the result of my getting loaded one night and doing card tricks for the bar.

"Naturally," I said dryly. "What else is new since I've been around?"

"Not much. The season is getting into full swing, but it's the same old story. I figured you were on a job and that's why you hadn't been around."

"Uh-uh," I said. "No job and I've been staying home and improving my mind."

"Watching Gunsmoke, huh?" he asked with a grin. "Well, you didn't miss much. There were a couple of school teachers staying here for a while who might have interested you. I thought of calling you but I didn't. I figured, job or no job, you'd start showing up as soon as the season began—and here you are."

"I only come around here for one reason, Buck; you're the fount of all information." That was pretty much true. There wasn't much that happened on the Beach without Buck knowing all about it. In addition to that, it often seemed that Buck knew every good-looking girl around and all the pertinent information about her. "Anything interesting stirring yet?"

"Not much," he said. "I hear that some gang from up north is planning on moving in on the race-track boys, so it may get lively later on."

"Who?"

"I don't know. I just heard a whisper about it. Seems they want to take over the wire services and the bookies, but that ain't going to be so easy."

"I don't imagine it will," I said. "How are they going to manage it?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. The way I heard it, maybe they're going to try to break the bookies."

"Well, they can dream, can't they?" I said. "But they must be tired of living if they're going to try."

"I don't know," Buck said. "The way it was told, they got the money and the guns to back it up."

"Where do you pick up these little tidbits, Buck?"

"You know how it is. Some guy was in here from New York and passed it along. Said he heard it up there, but nobody knew who was trying to make the pitch. Said the rumor was strong enough so that the smart money was worried for the first time in years."

"Well, whatever it is," I said, "count me out. I'll take a nice, dirty divorce case and be happy."

"Wine, women and wampum," he agreed. "What more does a man need?" Some more customers arrived at the bar and he went off to serve them.

I sipped my drink and watched the room slowly fill-

ing up. The magician came over to the bar and ordered a drink. Buck served him and lingered long enough to introduce us. His name was Paul Devollo.

"I was watching you," I told him. "Nice work."

"Thanks," he said. I could see he was trying to size me up; the introduction by Buck had him confused.

"It's really simple," I told him. "Buck knows that I'm interested in magic so he thought we ought to be introduced."

"You perform?"

"Only as an amateur," I said. "Where are you from?"

"Chicago."

"I thought so. Your close table work gave me the idea. There seem to be more magicians from Chicago who specialize in that kind of magic than there are in the East. I suppose you know Jay Marshall?"

"Of course," he said. For the next several minutes we swapped names back and forth as we talked about magicians we both knew. He pulled a deck of cards from his pocket and played with them as he talked. Then he offered them to me silently; it was the type of courtesy one magician will pay to another.

I took the deck and did a fast shuffle. I let him choose a card and put it back in the middle of the deck. I showed him it was still in the middle, then shuffled and let him cut the deck. Then, leaving the deck on the bar, I told him what his card had been and showed him it was on top of the deck he'd just cut.

"Nice," he said. "That wasn't a regular side steal, was it?"

I shook my head. "Not quite. It was something called the Elliott Control. Worked out by Bruce Elliott."

"The Phoenix?" he asked.

"The same," I said. I showed him how it worked. Then he took the deck and did several tricks for me. He was a good mechanic.

"I'd better get back to work," he said. He riffled the deck so that I could see two cards, the eight of spades and the four of clubs. "Remember them," he said and left me.

He went over and started doing tricks for the two

women and man across the bar from me. They were amused, but the older woman still kept tossing glances at me every few minutes. I had another drink and ignored her.

I had just about finished my drink and was paying no attention to them when I realized that the magician was speaking to me.

"You, sir," he was saying. He was standing in back of the three at the bar.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Would you mind taking part in an experiment?"

"I guess not," I said.

"Good," he said. "I have just been telling these two beautiful ladies that it is not only possible to read minds but to then project what I have read there to still another person. Since I wouldn't want to look in on their most personal thoughts, I have used a deck of playing cards to demonstrate. Each of the lovely ladies has looked at a card at random in the deck. I, of course, know what the cards were, having read it in their minds. I now ask you to concentrate and see if you catch the thoughts of myself or of the two ladies."

"All right," I said. I pretended to concentrate heavily.

"Now," he said, "can you tell the lovely lady on my right the name of the card she looked at?"

"It's a black card," I said, playing it up for all I was worth. To be honest, I was also enjoying it. "I see something that looks like a spade and the figure eight."

The older woman gasped, then clapped her hands together.

"And now the other little lady," the magician said.

"It's still very dark," I said. "I see something that looks like a clover leaf—no, it looks like the club in a deck of cards. And I see the figure four. It must be the four of clubs she's thinking about."

The beautiful doll gave me a smile for my reward and it was well worth the effort I'd made.

"Thank you, sir," the magician said. He smiled at the other people and moved on to one of the tables.

I went back to my drink but I noticed that the older woman was talking to her husband and then that he

called Buck over. A moment later, Buck came over to me.

"The gentleman," he said, winking at me, "would like you to join him and the two ladies for a drink."

I looked over at them and the man nodded, smiling. The young girl was smiling, too, but the older woman was nodding and giving me the eye. I would have said no, but I thought there might be a chance of getting acquainted with the girl.

"Okay," I said to Buck. I finished the drink in front of me and got off the stool. I headed around the bar, thinking I'd make it all the way around and get on the stool next to her. But I was wrong. The older woman reached out and grabbed my arm as I came up to her.

"Do sit beside me," she said. "I thought that was so fascinating. Are you sure you aren't a stooge for that magician?"

I was caught. The only way I could have gone on was to have been rude. So I took the stool next to her. There was a slight smile on the younger girl's face and I knew that she was well aware of what I had intended. Somehow that made it worse.

"No," I lied. "I just said what came into my mind."

Buck was already in front of us with bottles and glasses and the extra little touch that would make everything all right.

"Mr. and Mrs. Thorney, Miss Siena," he said, "Mr. Draco.'"

We all acknowledged Buck's formality, while he poured drinks for everyone. Then he discreetly withdrew, with only a glance in my direction which made it clear to me that he was being amused because I'd failed to run the gauntlet to the side of the doll.

"Are you staying in the hotel, Mr. Draco?" the man asked.

"No," I said. "I'm practically a native. I live here the year around."

"In business here?" he asked.

"In a way," I said.

"What line?" he asked. I realized he wasn't pushing but was actually interested.

"I'm a private detective," I said. "I'm sorry if I don't

look the part, but I left my trenchcoat home tonight."

They all laughed. "How thrilling," said Mrs. Thorney. "Frank, you talk to Susan. It isn't every night that I have the chance to talk to a private detective who also reads minds."

Her husband laughed with good nature and obediently turned to the girl next to him. Her glance passed over me with amusement, then centered on him and stayed there.

"You really must tell me all about yourself," Mrs. Thorney said to me.

"There really isn't much to tell, Mrs. Thorney," I said.

"Don't call me Mrs. Thorney," she said archly. "It makes me feel so old. My name is Katherine. What is your first name?"

"Peter," I said reluctantly.

"Now, then, Pete," she said, tucking one arm under mine, "you must really tell me all about your experiences. I'm sure they must be thrilling." She didn't wait for me to answer, but went right on with her own conversation. "My, you have such a strong arm. I just know that you must be a wonderful detective. What is it that private detectives are called? Private eyes? It's so expressive it makes me shudder. Oh, I had such a wonderful idea just then. Frank. Frank."

"Yes, my dear?" her husband said.

"Why don't we ask Pete here to have dinner with us tonight? Don't you think that's a marvelous idea? I believe we're only thirteen as it is and one more would keep away bad luck."

"I'm afraid—" I began.

"Nonsense," Frank Thorney said. "We'd be delighted to have you join us." He was the kind of man who made it sound as if I'd be doing him a favor by joining them. He smiled at me. "You might as well learn, Mr. Draco, that it's easier to do what Katherine wants than to try to argue with her."

The black-haired girl was watching me and I thought there was something encouraging in her glance. So I shrugged and gave in.

"It's very kind of both of you," I said. "I'll be happy to join you, if you're sure it's no trouble."

"No trouble," Katherine Thorney exclaimed. "Why you're saving my life by coming. Imagine thirteen people at the table. Literally saving my life."

Well, that's the way it went for the next half hour. We had a few more drinks and Katherine Thorney talked and squeezed my arm. Then we went into the Bamboo Room, with her holding me firmly by the arm. Other people began showing up. I was introduced to all of them, but didn't remember any of the names. A couple of the women were quite attractive and the rest were mediocre. Katherine Thorney made sure that I sat between her and one of the mediocre ones. I couldn't even see the pretty brunette without making it obvious.

After dinner there was dancing. Just so it would work, I asked Katherine to dance with me, then I managed to claim a dance with Susan Siena. She was pleasant and friendly, but I can't honestly say that I made any great time. When I took her back to the table, I danced with one of the other girls, a blonde, just to keep from going back to my seat. That was almost a mistake. The blonde danced so closely that any minute I expected a cop to stop us and demand to see our marriage license.

I'd thought of going back to the brunette but she was dancing with someone else when I returned the blonde to the table. So I went back to the table and listened to Katherine tell me that I was a "naughty boy."

Finally the whole party retired to the Hapsburg Club, which was a simulated night club on the floor below. The whiskey had been flowing generously throughout the dinner and it continued to in the club. Frank Thorney must have noticed my drinking habits, or he figured I needed it, for the waiter brought a whole bottle of VO just for me.

But it didn't help much. Katherine Thorney was still sticking to me and after she'd had a few drinks it seemed to me that she had at least six hands. I knew how some girls often feel.

It was about two in the morning before I got a break —not the kind I'd originally watched for, but by this time I was ready to accept anything. Katherine had to go to the ladies' room and announced it coyly. Once she was

gone I slipped over to her husband and thanked him solemnly for a wonderful evening. I said that I hoped he would say good night to his wife for me and he said he would. I wanted to say good night to the brunette too, but she was busily talking to some man so I said to hell with it. It had been a tough night and I was pretty well stoned.

I went upstairs and got my car and drove home. I went into the apartment, scattering clothes as I went, and tumbled into bed. I went to sleep the minute I hit the sack.

The bell kept ringing and ringing. I finally pushed myself out of bed and groped my way into the living room. But it wasn't the phone. Then I figured out it was the door. I went over and opened it wide enough to peer out. Lieutenant Dick Weston, of the Miami Beach Police, was there.

"What the hell?" I asked. "Don't you ever go home and go to bed?"

"Every night," he said. "And then I go to work in the morning. How are you, Pete?" He pushed his way past me into the apartment.

"Terrible," I admitted. "What time is it?"

"A little after nine. Have a big night?"

"Big and dull," I said. I went into the kitchen and poured myself a big glass of tomato juice. I put some fire under the coffee and drank the juice. I started to go back to the living room, but Dick had followed me into the kitchen.

"The coffee's a good idea," he said. "After you get some of it down you have to come downtown with me."

"Why?" I asked. "You stuck on a case and need some help?"

"Maybe," he said, but without the grin I had expected. "The D.A. wants to see you."

"The D.A.?" That woke me up. Dick Weston was a friend of mine but I couldn't say the same for the D.A. In fact, he hated my guts and had never tried to conceal it. "What does he want?"

"Where were you last night, Pete?" he asked.

"At the Hapsburg. Why?"

"Meet anybody named Mr. and Mrs. Frank Thorney?"

"Sure I did. I had dinner and spent the evening with them and their party. But what's that got to do with the D.A.?"

"Some time last night," he said, "about three hundred thousand dollars' worth of jewelry was stolen from the Thorney suite—and Frank Thorney was murdered."

CHAPTER 2

THAT WAS the last thing in the world I expected to hear and it took a minute or so to soak in. I had the feeling that I probably looked like a fish that had been yanked out of the water and left flopping about on the wharf.

"I never saw any of those people before," I said. "I don't mind going down to tell the D.A. what I do know, but why couldn't he wait until a decent hour and then phone and ask me to drop around when I had a chance?"

"You still don't understand, Pete," the lieutenant said. "The D.A. considers you one of the suspects."

That really left me with my mouth hanging open. "Why?" I managed finally.

"The story, the way we get it, is that they—or rather Mrs. Thorney—picked you up at the bar last night. Several people have mentioned that you and Mrs. Thorney seemed to be playing footsie all evening."

"She was playing, but I wasn't," I said sourly. "That woman is harder to get away from than an octopus. The first time she left to go to the ladies' room I got away."

"That's part of it, too, Pete," he said. "It seems Mrs. Thorney was gone quite a while. It's the D.A.'s idea—and one advanced by some of the guests—that you left and met her and went upstairs with her. The D.A. goes on to theorize that while you were there you found the chance to grab a key to the suite, or fixed the lock, then came back to rob them later and were caught by Thorney. He would've recognized you, so you had to kill him."

I found my voice and gave a few choice comments about the theory, stopping only when I ran out of breath.

"I didn't say that was what I thought," Weston said. "In fact, I don't think you'd do anything like that. If it had been up to me, I might have asked you some questions about you and Mrs. Thorney, but that's all. But you know the D.A."

"I know him," I said grimly. I added a few things about him just to prove that I did know him.

"The D.A. has a second theory in case anything should damage the first one," he said.

"What?"

"That you and Thorney got into a fight up in the suite because of the business with his wife and you killed him. Then you decided you might as well grab the jewels."

"He's an idiot," I said. "How was Thorney killed?"

"With the well-known blunt instrument. Over the back of the head. It could have been a blackjack or a gun. No weapon in the room."

"This other nonsense," I said. "Does Mrs. Thorney say that I went up to the suite with her?"

"Of course not, but the D.A. figures she'd lie about that. She does admit that there was some flirting between the two of you."

"Not between. It was strictly a one-way street." The coffee was ready and I poured two cups. I had some VO in mine. My head began to clear up as I sipped the mixture.

"What's the rest of the picture?" I asked.

"I think we'd better wait until after you've seen the D.A. Then I'll fill you in."

"My friend," I said bitterly.

"That's just the trouble," he said. "When I told him I didn't think you were guilty, he accused me of saying it because I'm your friend. You don't really need any additional information to defend yourself with the D.A., and it might only make him harder to get along with if he knows I've told you the whole story."

"I suppose you're right," I said. "Okay, Dick, I'll be ready in a few minutes. Have some more coffee while you wait."

I went in and shaved and showered and got dressed. I went back into the kitchen and had another shot of VO. I began to feel almost human.

"Let's go," I said.

"I'd better take your gun in and have the lab boys look at it," Weston said apologetically.

"It's downstairs in the office," I said. I led the way downstairs and unlocked the desk drawer. I put the .38 on the table, then got out the short-barrelled .32. "You might as well look at both of them while you're at it. But I want them back soon. I may go gunning for a D.A."

"This afternoon," he said. "Got a blackjack, Pete?"

"No. No baseball bats either. You want to search the place?"

"That won't be necessary," he said. "Let's go."

We went outside and I climbed into my Cadillac and started down Collins Avenue. Weston followed along behind in the city car. When I reached the city building, I parked. I got out and waited for Weston.

"Sorry, Pete," he said as we went in. "I won't be able to help you any in here. Anything I'd say would only make it worse."

"Who the hell needs any help?" I said. I knew it wasn't Weston's fault, but I was sore at everybody at the moment.

We entered the D.A.'s office and his girl told us to go on in. Weston stepped past me and opened the door. "Here's Pete Draco," he said. We both stepped inside and faced the D.A.

Arthur Somerton had been District Attorney for two years. He was a big beefy man who liked to throw his weight around. Before he got in public office he'd been a not too successful attorney with a constantly worried expression on his face. Since then he'd been wearing the perpetual grin of a fat cat. It was especially broad when he looked at me.

"Well, Draco," he said, "do you know why you're here?"

"Sure," I said. I dropped into one of his chairs and lit a cigarette. "I'm here because you're an idiot."

"That sort of talk will get you nowhere," he blustered.

He looked at Weston. "Did you tell him why we wanted to see him?"

"I told him that you considered him a suspect," Weston said, putting a little extra emphasis on the "you."

It wasn't lost on Somerton; his grin got a little tighter. "Why did you do it, Draco?"

"Do what?" I asked.

"You know what I mean," he snapped. "The robbery of the Thorney jewels and the murder of Frank Thorney."

"Are you accusing me of those two crimes?"

"I'm asking you," he said.

"If you think I did it," I said, "arrest me and charge me. And then I'll make you look like a bigger monkey than you are—which is probably quite impossible."

"I have the right to question you without charging you."

"Sure, you do," I said. "And I have the right to tell you what you can do with your questions. Which I'm doing. I don't answer any questions without an attorney. I will make a simple statement about the evening if you want it, but that's all."

"Then make it."

"You want it on the record or don't you? I don't intend to say it more than once."

He jabbed a button on his desk and a moment later his secretary came in with her book and pencil. She sat down and waited.

"Whenever you're ready, Draco," he said.

"Last night at about six o'clock," I said, "I went to the Hapsburg Hotel and entered the bar on the main floor. I sat at the bar and had a drink. Across from me there was a man of about sixty-five, a woman of about forty, and a girl—a living doll—in her early twenties. I was told by Buck Farrell, the bartender, that they were Mr. and Mrs. Thorney and Miss Siena. I also had a short conversation with the professional magician who works in the bar and later I assisted him in a card trick. As a result of that, Mr. Thorney invited me to have a drink with him and the two ladies. I accepted and then they invited me to have dinner with them and some of their

friends. Again, I accepted. During the evening, which was spent mostly in the Bamboo Room and the Hapsburg Club, Mrs. Thorney continually made passes at me, although they were neither returned nor encouraged. During all of this time, we were in full sight of all the other guests. At about two o'clock in the morning, Mrs. Thorney trotted off to the little girl's room and I took advantage of the situation to say good-bye to Mr. Thorney and leave. One of the boys on the door got my car for me and this should be a matter of record. I drove straight home and went to bed, where I stayed until early this morning when I was summoned into the august presence of the Honorable Arthur Somerton, District Attorney for Dade County." I stopped and looked at the D.A. "That's it, Somerton. Take it or leave it. You type it up, honey, and I'll sign it. The name is Pete Draco."

"I know," the girl murmured. She glanced at her boss and he nodded. She stood up and walked out of the office. I watched her go. She had one of those nice going-away walks.

"That was very cooperative, Draco," the D.A. said sarcastically, "but there are some more questions I'd like to ask you. Now—"

"I said that was it," I interrupted, "and it is. Everything I have to say to you is for the record. Nothing off the record. If you want to ask me any questions in your official capacity, then charge me. Otherwise, I'm walking out of here."

His face turned a deep red and for a minute I thought maybe he was going to tell me I was under arrest. But he pulled himself together.

"I am not ready to make a formal charge yet," he said stiffly. "But you're a long way from being in the clear, Draco. Don't leave town without notifying us. And you'd better have a better story than the one you just dictated."

"If I do, I'll tell it to somebody who will understand it," I said. I stood up. "You want me to stay and sign that statement? I'll wait out in the other room where the air is better."

"We'll have it typed up and sent over to your office,"

he said. His face was stiff with anger. "Just remember what I told you, Draco. Stick around."

"I'll be around a long time after you're not," I told him. I crossed the office and opened the door. I stopped and looked back. "I'll drop in and see you later, Lieutenant, to get my guns back."

Weston nodded, trying to look as impersonal as he could.

"By the way, Somerton," I said, speaking louder so that my voice would carry through the reception room, "you've spent most of your life in Miami Beach, haven't you?"

"All of it," he said promptly. "My father was one of the early pioneers of Miami Beach and I was born here. That is one of the reasons I am interested in keeping the Beach a fit place in which to live." He sounded as if he were making a campaign speech.

"In other words," I said, "you're a genuine son-of-a-Beach, aren't you?" With that, I closed the door, winked at the secretary and walked out, my good humor restored.

I drove straight back to my place and parked. I went upstairs, poured myself a drink and sat down to think the whole thing over. I didn't think I was really in any danger, but if the D.A. wanted to be nasty—and this one always did—he could make life very uncomfortable for me until the case was solved. He might even be able to use his suspicions to have my license suspended until everything was cleared up.

It might be a couple of hours before I could talk with Weston and even then he'd have to go carefully, although he'd probably give me most of the information he had. It would help if I had a client; then I'd have a legitimate reason for digging around in the case.

The phone rang. I picked it up and said hello.

"Mr. Draco?" a woman's voice asked.

"Yes."

"Oh, thank goodness I reached you," she said. "This is Katherine Thorney. Have you—"

"I heard about what happened, Mrs. Thorney," I said quickly. "I'm very sorry."

"It's so terrible," she whimpered. "I don't know what to even think. Frank was such a wonderful man—" She broke off in tears, sobbing into the phone.

I waited silently while she cried for a couple of minutes. Finally the sobs subsided and there was no sound except a faint sniffling.

"P-Pete," she said uncertainly.

"I'm here," I said. "I'm very sorry, Mrs. Thorney. If there's anything I can do . . ." I trailed off because I didn't really mean that.

"Oh, but there is," she said. "That was why I phoned you. The police don't seem to be doing anything but running around and asking silly questions and then I remembered that you are a private detective. I want to hire you to find out what happened to my jewels and get them back for me."

"And find out who murdered your husband?" I asked dryly.

"That, too, of course," she said. "You will do it, won't you, Pete? You just have to help me. I don't have anyone at all to turn to in my hour of need. Will you?"

"I'll come over and talk to you about it," I said.

"When?" she asked.

"I'll come right away," I said and hung up.

Well, I had my client, if I wanted one. There was only one trouble with it. I had a feeling that Katherine Thorney was going to be more dangerous than a murder charge.

CHAPTER 3

WHEN I ARRIVED at the hotel, I turned the Cadillac over to one of the boys and went inside. I wasn't looking forward to seeing Katherine Thorney, but it was all part of the business. I called her on the house phone and she told me to come up.

She was alone when I got there. She met me at the door. Her face was puffy from crying, although she had obviously tried to make it look better. Even death wasn't going to stop her flirting. She was in that stage—or maybe she'd always been in it.

"Pete," she said. She clutched me with both hands and started sobbing all over the shoulder of my sport jacket.

I patted her on the shoulder and then steered her over to a chair. I pushed her into it gently but firmly.

"Now you sit there," I told her. I crossed the room to a chair that was at least fifteen feet from her. "I'll sit over here. Pull yourself together and tell me what happened."

"But I don't have anyone else to turn to," she said between sobs. "Nobody else cares. Poor Frank. He was always so sweet."

"The best way to help Frank," I told her, "is for us to do something about solving his murder. And to get your jewelry back."

"Of course," she said. "What will I do, Pete?"

"First, dry up the waterworks. Right now."

"All right," she said. She mopped at her face and the sobs trickled off into silence. "What do you want me to do, Pete?" she asked meekly.

"Tell me what happened."

"Our party broke up about an hour after you ran out on us," she said. She managed to look as if she were pouting while still mourning her dead husband. "It must have been about three o'clock when Frank and I came upstairs. We talked for a few minutes about what a lovely party it had been, then Frank went into his room to get ready for bed."

"Did you and your husband come upstairs together?" I asked.

"Of course."

"Did anyone else come up with you?"

"Not to our suite," she said. "Susan Siena and Roger and Betty Andrews came up in the elevator with us. All three of them are on our floor. But we said good night as we left the elevator and Frank and I came on here. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," I said. "What happened after your husband went into his room?"

"About thirty minutes later I went into my bathroom to take a hot bath. I always have trouble sleeping and I find that a long hot bath helps."

"What were you doing during those thirty minutes?" I asked.

"I put my jewelry on my dressing table, undressed, put on my robe, removed my make-up—you know all those little things we women do when we're alone." She was beginning to sound coy again.

"All right," I said curtly. "Tell me the rest of it."

"Well," she said, "I was in the tub soaking for a long while, probably an hour or more. I don't know exactly what time it was but it was after four-thirty when I got out of the tub. I toweled myself, put on my robe and came out intending to go to bed. Poor Frank was lying on the floor right there beside my bed. At first, I thought perhaps he'd had too much to drink and had passed out but then I saw that he was—dead."

She started crying again. I lighted a cigarette and stayed where I was. After a couple of minutes she shut it off and looked up at me.

"You didn't hear anything while you were in your bath?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't suppose I could have. I had the hot water running all the time I was in the tub."

"Okay. What did you do when you discovered your husband was dead?"

"I—I called downstairs and they said they would get the police."

"Why the police? Why not just a doctor? Did you know that your husband had been murdered?"

"N-no, but when I went to pick up the phone I saw that my jewelry was gone from the dressing table and I told them about that, too, when I phoned."

"You must have been very upset," I said. "What did you do while you waited for the cops to come?"

"I couldn't bear to stay here with Frank. I went down the hall to Susan's room. She was already in bed, asleep, but she awakened and let me in. She was very nice to me."

"That's Susan Siena, the girl who was at the bar with you last night?"

"Yes."

"Now, tell me something else. Why did you give the police the idea that I was throwing passes at you last night so that they jumped to the conclusion that I might have gotten into a fight with your husband?"

"Why, I did nothing of the kind," she said indignantly. "I merely said that you and I had become very good friends last night." If she'd given it the same reading when she said it to the cops, no wonder the D.A. had gotten ideas.

"Sure," I said. "Well, what do you want me to do? You want me to try to find out who took your jewelry and murdered your husband?"

"Please, Pete. I'll pay you anything."

"You'll just have to pay my usual fee," I said. "One hundred dollars a day and expenses."

She nodded. "Should I pay you in advance?"

"Do you have plenty of money?" I asked. "Or do you have to wait until the estate is settled?"

"I have money of my own."

"Then mail a check for five hundred dollars, as a retainer, to my office," I said. "The address is in the

phone book. In the meantime, I'll go to work."

"Pete, don't leave me," she wailed. "I need comforting."

"That isn't what I was hired for," I told her. "In fact, I'm not even for hire in that category." I left the room without looking back.

I went back downstairs. The main bar wasn't open yet, so I went through the back of the lobby and out to the patio bar. There were a couple of solitary drinkers there, most of them swiveled around so they could watch the pool. I didn't blame them. There were four or five girls there in bikinis who were worth watching. I looked at them myself until the bartender interrupted my reverie by asking me what I wanted. I almost told him before I realized he was asking about something else. I ordered a dry martini. I watched him, to be sure he used Beefeater Gin, then I went over to the house phone at one end of the bar. I asked for Susan Siena.

"Hello," she said. Her voice was just as throaty and sexy as I had remembered it.

"This is Pete Draco," I said. "I met you last night in the bar with the Thorneys."

"Oh, yes, the private detective," she said. There was a hint of amusement in her voice.

"I want to talk to you about what happened later last night."

"Why? I told the police all that I know."

"I've been hired by Mrs. Thorney to work on the case," I said.

"Really?" she asked. "I know that she mentioned something about hiring you but I didn't think she was serious. She said it would be such a comfort to her if you were working on the case. By comfort, I don't think she meant your running around and asking questions."

"That one was below the belt," I said. "You know damn well I was trying to get away from her all last evening. Anyway, I am going to run around asking questions of everyone who was there last night. And I want to start with you."

"Should I be honored?" she asked. "All right. When?"

"Right now, if it's possible. I'm down at the patio bar. Come down and I'll spring for some lunch while we're talking."

"All right," she agreed. "I'll be down in a few minutes."

I hung up and went back to my stool at the bar. I tried the martini and it was just right. I sipped it and went back to a scientific survey of the swimming pool. It was a lot more fun than bird watching.

I'd just finished the martini when she came through the double glass doors on the other side of the dining area of the patio. She was fully dressed but my gaze left the bikinis as though jet-propelled. She had what it takes to make a man forget everything except that he's a man. I left the bar and went to meet her.

We went over and took a table. Now that I had her to look at, I didn't bother to make sure that I was sitting where I could see the pool. A waitress came over to take our order. I had another martini and she ordered whiskey and water. We made small talk about the weather until the drinks came. Weather is the favorite small talk in Miami Beach; you'd think it was the only city in America that had weather.

When the waitress was gone, I lifted my glass in a silent toast to her. We drank.

"Thanks for coming down," I said. "Want to tell me about last night?"

"What do you want to know?"

"What do you think happened?"

She smiled. "I got the impression that at least some of the police thought you had done it."

"I got that impression myself," I said sourly. "I asked you what you thought."

"I suppose that someone broke in to get the jewels and Mr. Thorney caught them. What else is there to think?"

"Got any candidates?"

"I imagine it could be almost anyone. She's been flaunting her jewelry all over Miami Beach."

"Doesn't she ever lock them up?"

"I believe she has some at the bank and others are kept in the hotel safe. Each day she puts away the ones she wore the night before and gets out a new collection.

Women like Katherine Thorney are just asking for trouble and there are a lot of them in her set."

"Are you in that set?" I asked.

"Not really. More on the fringe."

"How long have you known the Thorneys?"

"I knew them slightly in New York," she said. "We used to run into each other at the same parties. When they saw me down here, Katherine Thorney latched on to me. She has a habit of doing that—as I believe you noticed last night."

I winced. "You stayed on until the bitter end of the party last night?"

She nodded. "The party broke up perhaps an hour after you skulked away."

"I didn't think you noticed," I said. "I wanted to say good night to you, but you seemed completely absorbed in some character."

She laughed with an awareness that I was sulking a bit.

"Okay, okay," I said. "Let's get back to you. What are you doing in Miami Beach?"

"Having fun."

"What do you do in New York?"

"The same thing. Or, at least, I try to."

"Does that mean that you're wealthy?"

"No. I have a small income which my father left me but it doesn't make me wealthy. I have a tiny apartment on the East Side and my only luxury is clothes, so I can manage."

"You're not married?"

She laughed again. Every time she did it sent little chills racing up and down my spine so I didn't mind that it was partly at me.

"No," she said. "Would it have stopped you if I were?"

"No," I admitted.

"But I thought you wanted to question me about last night?" she said.

"I do," I said. I beckoned the waitress and ordered two more drinks. "Did everyone leave the party at the same time?"

"About the same time," she said, "except for you."

"Forget about me—or, rather, don't forget about me. Where did the others go?"

"Home, I imagine. It was about three o'clock."

"Did you know any of the others?"

"Not before last night. Katherine Thorney has a habit of picking up stray people the way others pick up stray cats. I believe one of the girls is staying here, but I don't think any of the others are—no, wait a minute. There's also a man and his wife."

"That would be the Andrews?"

"I think that was their name. They also live on the same floor as the Thorneys, but I've never seen them before last night."

"What's the girl's name?"

"I don't know," she said.

"You all went upstairs together last night?"

"Yes. That is, the Thorneys, the Andrews—if that's their name—and I. I didn't see the other girl go."

"She might have left earlier?"

"I suppose she might have."

"Somebody," I said, more to myself than to her, "could have gotten in the room and hidden before they got there. And then waited until it seemed as if the coast was clear."

"Do you think that's what happened?" she asked.

"Maybe," I said. "I'll have to talk to everybody who was at the party, then maybe I can start coming up with something. Have dinner with me tonight and I'll tell you what I think."

"Won't you have to report to your new employer?" she asked sweetly. "I can't imagine Katherine having you work for her and not insisting on you reporting every evening."

"I'll make regular reports to her—by phone," I said. "Will you have dinner with me tonight?"

"Perhaps," she said with a smile. "I'll have to see what happens. You invited me to lunch but so far you've only plied me with liquor."

"I can take a hint," I muttered. I called the waitress over and we ordered lunch. She wouldn't have another drink, but I told the waitress to bring me another martini.

We talked about other things—not the weather—while we had lunch. Then we walked into the lobby and lingered until she agreed to have dinner with me that night. I watched her get into the elevator and vanish as the doors closed. I looked up a bellhop I knew and slipped him ten bucks. It didn't earn me any more than I had already gotten from Susan. Four of the Thorneys' guests were staying at the Hapsburg. Susan Siena, Roger and Betty Andrews and Judy Greene. He didn't know anything about the other guests. I slipped around and saw the house detective, but he didn't have anything to add, either. Since he wasn't exactly friendly to private operators, I didn't press the point.

I went out and got my car and drove down Collins Avenue. When I reached my office, I stopped. I was going on to see Lieutenant Weston but I wanted to check if I'd had any calls first. I went in and called my answering service. There had been two calls, neither of them important. One had been a guy who wanted to hire me on a divorce case. I told her if he called back to tell him I was busy. The other had been a personal call from some girl I'd met the week before. I was going to be busy if she called back, too.

I was just going out the door when the phone rang. I went back and scooped it up.

"Mr. Draco?" a man's voice asked.

"That's me."

"I'd like to hire you to do a job of investigation for me."

"What kind of job?" I asked.

"Well, I'll tell you," he said. "I'm pretty busy today and I have to go back home this afternoon. Why don't you meet me in Pensacola the first thing in the morning and I'll tell you all about it. I'll pay your expenses, naturally."

"Pensacola?" I said. "That's a little out of my territory. Anyway, I couldn't go that quickly. I'm on a case now and I'm not sure how soon it'll be finished. Sorry."

"What do you charge?"

"A hundred a day and expenses."

"Drop the other case," he said. "I'll give you five hun-

dred a day and expenses. And a bonus if you do the job for me."

"Sorry," I said. "That wouldn't be ethical. What did you say your name was?"

"Hodges."

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Mr. Hodges. If I find out this afternoon that my case is going to wind up quickly, I'll give you a call. Where are you staying?"

He hesitated a minute. "The Fountainbleau," he said then. "You'd better take the job now, Draco. It may not be open this afternoon."

"I'll have to take that chance," I told him. "Good-bye, Mr. Hodges."

I hung up and waited a couple of minutes. I didn't know what it was but something bothered me about that call. It wasn't often that someone offered to pay me five hundred dollars a day. Finally I picked up the phone and dialed the number of the Fountainbleau.

In a few minutes I had part of the answer. There wasn't any Mr. Hodges registered at the Fountainbleau.

CHAPTER 4

AFTER I HUNG UP, I sat at the desk for a few minutes thinking about Mr. Hodges. It sounded to me as if someone didn't want me to work on the Thorney case. But only four people knew I was working—Katherine Thorney, Susan Siena, the bellhop and the Hapsburg house detective. It set up some interesting possibilities.

Finally I gave up thinking about it and went out to the Cadillac. I drove on downtown to police headquarters.

Lieutenant Weston was in his office, looking none too happy.

"Hi," I said. "I thought I'd drop around and collect my guns—that is, unless you've decided to arrest me and hold them for evidence."

He opened a drawer in his desk and tossed my two guns on top of it. "No signs that they were used to slug anyone with," he said, "although they could have been thoroughly cleaned afterward."

"Is that what you think?" I demanded.

"No," he admitted. "The D.A. mentioned it when I gave him the report. But he's beginning to weaken."

"How come?"

"For one thing, the shape of the wound pretty much rules out a gun. Looks more like a blackjack of some kind. Are you sure you don't have one?"

"You're beginning to think like the D.A.," I said.

"You know better than that, Pete," he said. "I just meant that if you do have one it would be better to bring it in than to have the D.A. find it later on."

"Okay, I don't have one," I said. "What have you gotten on the case so far?"

He gave me a very peculiar look.

"I'm on the case," I said. "Mrs. Thorney hired me this morning."

"We don't have much," he said. "Thorney was killed by a single blow from a blackjack—or a heavy object wrapped in a handkerchief or a shirt or something of the sort."

"Why do you say that?" I was thinking of a man who wrapped a handkerchief around his blackjack.

"There were a few linen threads in the wound."

"What about the other people at the party?"

"We've talked to all of them, but nothing turned up. Some have alibis, some don't. But there isn't anything pointing to any one of them."

"How about a copy of the list with their addresses?"

"Sure," he said. He took the list from his desk and passed it over. "So, as of the moment, Pete, we've got nothing. And the pressure is on."

"How come? It only happened this morning."

"The jewels. This is the fifth jewel robbery in Miami Beach in the past ten weeks. We think they're all the work of the same gang. City Hall thinks the tourists might start leaving if any more are pulled."

"Anybody killed on the others?"

He shook his head. "Two of them were pulled when nobody was home. In the other three cases, someone was knocked out with a blow similar to the one that killed Thorney."

"Any ideas?"

"Only that we're pretty sure that the murder of Thorney was deliberate."

"Why?"

"That is if it's the same person or people. Whoever knocked out the three people on those other jobs was an expert at it. He knocked them colder'n a deep freeze without even breaking the skin on their heads. It takes an expert to do that, so you can be sure he didn't suddenly make a mistake with Thorney."

"Makes sense," I admitted. "Got any leads?"

"Not a damn one. We haven't had from the first case on. None of the jewelry has shown up and nobody ever

got a glimpse of the robber or robbers. The nearest we've come to having a clue—and it's only a theory—is that in this case it was one of the dinner guests. Maybe it wasn't."

"Yeah," I said. "You might be able to pin it down closer if Katherine Thorney wasn't so screwy. But she's known for picking up characters on the spur of the moment, so if someone wanted to crash the party it wouldn't be hard and she probably wouldn't even know that it had happened."

He nodded. "Of course, we've still got the D.A.'s choice for the guilty man."

I passed a few choice remarks about the D.A. "You think all of these have been one-man jobs?"

He shrugged. "Maybe," he said. "Or maybe a small gang. One thing is certain. They must be doing pretty well. They haven't had to try to float any of the jewelry yet."

"Maybe somewhere else."

"Uh-uh. The police of every city have a complete description of the stuff. Something would have turned up if they'd been unloading it anywhere. You know jewelry isn't something you can stop off and sell to a farmer in Iowa."

"You're probably right." I tapped the list of names. "You got any personal ideas about any of these characters? I don't mean what's in the reports, but what you feel?"

"A few of them don't ring true—you'll see if you talk to them—but it doesn't mean a damn thing to our case. You know what Florida is like."

"Full of snow birds," I said. "They fly down every year for the pickings. I know. Well, I'll keep in touch."

"Do that little thing," he said. "I might like to know what you're doing myself, and don't forget that the eyes of Big Brother Somerton are on you. He will view with dark suspicion the fact that you've been hired by the new widow. . . . I'm a bit curious about it myself."

"Her money is as good as they make it," I said. "All I have to do is watch out for her hands. I intend solving it by making all my reports over the telephone."

He grinned. "Well—good luck. And don't get in the D.A.'s hair."

"How do you think I get my kicks?" I asked indignantly. With that, I left. We both had work to do.

Back in the car, I checked over the list of guests. The nearest stop seemed to be a Beach hotel only about fifteen blocks away. Three of the guests were staying there. Robert Urbino, Charles Novelle and Jane Benedict. I didn't remember the names but then I hadn't remembered most of them five minutes after being introduced. I put the list away and headed uptown.

When I reached the hotel I put the Cadillac in a parking lot and went in. I went to the house phones and called Jane Benedict. She wasn't in. Then I tried Robert Urbino, but the operator told me that Mr. Urbino was in the Seasurf Room having lunch. I stepped out into the lobby and located the Seasurf. I walked over and stood in the doorway.

It was lunch time so the room was filled, but I finally spotted a couple of faces I remembered from the night before. They were sitting together at a table over in the corner. Since I remembered both of them, I thought it was a safe bet that this was Urbino and Novelle. I walked over to their table.

"Hi," I said.

They looked at me blankly for a minute, then recognition came to the eyes of one of them.

"Hello," he said, but he sounded as if he had no intention of letting it ripen into a friendship. He looked at the man with him. "He was at the party last night," he explained.

"Oh," the second man said. He didn't sound enthusiastic, either. "Hello."

In the meantime, I was sizing up both of them. They fit into what Lieutenant Weston had been talking about. They were expensively dressed and certainly didn't look out of place in the hotel, but there was something just a little off base about them. I couldn't put my finger on it, but it was there.

"Mind if I join you for a minute?" I asked.

They did mind, but they didn't say so. I pulled up a

chair and sat down across from them.

"Having lunch?" one of them asked.

"Not just now," I said. "I never believe in eating on an empty stomach." I hailed a passing waitress and told her to bring me a martini. Then I turned back to the two. "You probably don't remember my name. It's Pete Draco."

They nodded but didn't volunteer any information.

"I remember," I said, "that one of you is Urbino and the other is Novelle, but damned if I remember which is which."

They finally made a decision about that. "I'm Urbino," one of them said. He was taller and darker than the other one and maybe a couple of years younger. Both of them were somewhere in their thirties.

"Been in Miami Beach long?" I asked.

"Three, four weeks," Urbino grunted.

The waitress brought my martini. I took a sip. It was good.

"Staying long?" I asked.

"Maybe." It was Novelle's turn.

"That was some party last night," I said. I was being chatty as hell. "Know the Thorneys long?"

"No," Urbino said. He looked at me. "You're asking a lot of questions, Draco."

"Oh, I forgot to mention something," I said. "I'm a private detective. Mrs. Thorney hired me to represent her. I guess she doesn't feel the cops can do the job. You do know what happened last night, don't you?"

"Yeah. Why did you come to see us?"

"I want to talk to everyone who was there last night. Thought I might get some kind of lead."

"We already told the cops everything we know," Novelle said.

"Of course," Urbino added, "there's no reason why we can't tell Draco the same things we told the cops. We don't have anything to hide." It was the longest speech he'd made since I came in.

"Good," I said. "How long had you known the Thorneys?"

"We met them the night before at a bar," Urbino said.

"We got to talking and she invited us. She was kind of screwy but we figured it might be fun so we went."

"Just the two of you together?"

He hesitated a minute. "No. There was a girl with us when we met them, so she went along last night. She stays here in the hotel."

"Jane Benedict?"

He nodded.

"Know her long?" I asked.

"Since we been here," he said. "We kept running into her at the pool. She didn't seem to know anybody so we asked her out to dinner a couple of times. She was along when we were all invited to the party last night."

"Did you know any of the other guests there?"

"No."

"Mrs. Thorney was wearing a lot of jewelry last night. Did you notice anybody paying special attention to her?"

Novelle grinned. "You," he said. "I figured you were on the make for the ice."

"Thanks," I said sourly. "What time did you leave the party last night?"

"When it broke up this morning," Urbino said. "I guess it was about three o'clock."

"All three of you leave together?"

"Yeah."

"What did you do then?"

"Came back here. The girl went to her room and we went to ours."

"You know that she went to her room?"

"No, but she said she was going."

"What about you two?" I asked. "Can either one of you swear that the other one really went to his room and didn't double back to the Hapsburg?"

Urbino looked amused. "Yeah," he said. "We have a suite together. We both went upstairs and went to sleep."

"Okay," I said. "You know where Jane Benedict is today?"

"No."

I looked at the two of them. My questions weren't getting me anywhere, but I was getting interested in both of them. They didn't strike the right note for tourists.

They didn't talk like it and they didn't carry themselves like it.

"Here on business or a vacation?" I asked casually.

"Just relaxing," Urbino said.

"What do you do when you're not relaxing?"

"Novelle and I have a trucking business back home. We're partners."

"Where's back home?"

"The Big Town. New York."

That could explain it. A couple of men who had made a lot of money in the trucking business and come up the hard way could sound like they did, but it didn't satisfy me. After you've been in this racket long enough, you get a feeling about people.

"What else have you been doing since you're down here?" I asked. I didn't have anything in mind.

"Just relaxing," Urbino said.

"Been playing the horses?"

"We don't gamble," Urbino said shortly.

"You must have some vices," I said with a smile. I decided to push a little. "Either one of you boys ever done any time?"

A curtain came down over whatever friendliness they'd managed to summon up for me.

"Look, Draco," Urbino said, and his voice was suddenly hard. "We've been trying to tell you everything we know, just like we did the cops, but it doesn't give you any right to get insulting."

"Sorry," I said. "It's just that I have an unfortunate personality." I finished my martini and put the glass down. "I'll probably see you boys around."

I got up and left. On my way out I got a check from the waitress and paid for my martini. I went out and got in the Cadillac and made for the next stop.

Edward Hayden was staying with his wife at a hotel a couple of blocks north. It was his wife who had met Katherine Thorney—at a beauty parlor—and had been invited to the party. But she hadn't been feeling well the night before and had insisted on her husband's going without her. He had nothing to add to what I already knew. He seemed just like what he said he

was—a contractor from Long Island. Maybe he was.

Next I saw a man named Fred Burton. He was an aging playboy who had recovered from his hangover of the night before and was already working to collect another. He said that he had met the Thorneys once or twice in New York but he didn't know anything about them. He had thought both of them bores but he could never resist any sort of party so he had gone. He hadn't paid any attention to anything but the drink in front of him and one of the girls. He admitted that he'd made lots of time with the first and none at all with the second.

Going on down the list, I saw Jeanne Marden. She was a pretty little brunette who was on her vacation from a secretarial job in New York. She'd been thrilled at being invited to the party and seemed to be quite upset over what had happened. She could add nothing.

By the time I finished with her, I decided that I'd go on to the Hapsburg. There were three people there I wanted to question and by then it would probably be time for me to pick up Susan for our date.

I tried Judy Greene first. The operator told me she was at the pool. I went through the lobby and out to the heart-shaped pool. There were a couple of dozen people there, some of them in swimming and others soaking up the sun, but there was only one I recognized so I decided she must be Judy Greene. I went over to where she was stretched out on a beach chair. I pulled up the next chair and sat down.

"Hello," I said.

She looked up, startled. Then she recognized me.

"Oh, hello," she said. "You were at the party last night, weren't you?"

She was a plain-looking little woman somewhere in her middle thirties. Her face and arms and legs were covered with oil and you could see she was trying desperately to get a tan but she only managed to look sunburned.

"Pete Draco," I said, nodding. "You're Judy Greene, aren't you?"

"Yes," she said. "Isn't it terrible, what happened? That poor Mr. Thorney."

"That's why I'm here," I said. "Mrs. Thorney has hired me to work on it. I'm a private detective."

"Oh," she said. Just that one word, but it told a lot about her. She was truly horrified about the murder, but there was also the excitement of having been to the party, of being even remotely related to a robbery and a murder, being questioned by the police and finally meeting a private detective. It would make many an interesting hour with the "girls" when she got home again.

She was more than willing to answer all my questions, but it was still a blank. She didn't know anything. She'd met Katherine Thorney at the pool and been invited to the party. She thought it was very democratic of Mrs. Thorney. She told me that she worked in a department store in New York and each year saved her money for two weeks in Miami Beach. You could hear between the lines that she'd been doing this for years, first hoping that she'd get a rich husband and more lately hoping that she'd get any kind of husband. But I was grateful for one thing. She seemed to be the only person there who hadn't been watching Katherine Thorney and me.

As soon as I could, I broke away and went back to the lobby. I used the house phone to call the Andrews, but there was no answer. They hadn't left any message with the operator or the desk. So I called Susan Siena's room. She was surprised to hear from me so early but said she could be ready in a half hour. I told her I'd be in the bar.

There were only a couple of other early drinkers sitting on the other side of the bar. Buck was busily polishing the mahogany but he put away the rag and came over the minute he saw me. He started to reach for the VO bottle but I stopped him.

"It's martini time," I told him.

He started mixing it. "You know about what happened this morning after the party broke up?" he said.

"I know. The cops got me out of bed this morning."

"They say the guy got three hundred grand in ice. That right?"

"Something like it."

He poured the martini and twisted the lemon peel over it.

"Got any ideas?" he asked.

"No, but I'm trying," I told him. "Mrs. Thorney hired me to work on it."

"She's a card, ain't she?" he said. "She was going hot after you last night."

"Everybody in Miami Beach knows that," I said sourly. "The cops told me that this was the fifth ice job in the Beach in the last few weeks. You know about that?"

"I heard that somebody was being busy."

"Did you pick up anything else about it?"

He shook his head. "I guess whoever is lifting the ice might be a little close-mouthed about it. . . . You going up to see the Thorney dame now?"

"Not if I can help it. I'm meeting the young one here."

"Miss Siena?" He winked. "The old girl had you crowded to the rail last night but I knew you'd break out when you reached the home stretch."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, pal."

"Which reminds me," he said. "Did I tell you about the guy who met a Martian and said, 'Didn't I see you walking down Collins Avenue last night with a radio under your arm?' And the Martian said, 'That was no radio; that was my wife.'?"

"You didn't and I wish you hadn't," I said. "Why don't you get off this Martian kick?"

"I like them," he said. "Do me something."

Another customer showed up and Buck went over to take care of him. Before he could get back to me, Susan Siena showed up. She looked even more beautiful than I remembered her from a few hours earlier. She slipped up onto the stool next to me.

"How did I do?" she asked.

I looked at my watch. "Twenty-nine and one-half minutes," I said. "And the results look as if a lifetime had been spent on them."

She smiled at me. "Do you always say such nice things?"

"Only when they're deserved. . . . Do you want to

have a drink here before we go out on the town, or shall I gulp this one?"

"Oh, never gulp. I'll have a martini."

I caught Buck's eye and he came over. He made a martini for her and discreetly retired.

"Have you seen Katherine?" she asked.

"Not since she hired me this morning—and I don't intend to. Why?"

"She called me three times to ask if I knew where you were. Said she just had to talk to you. Do you always treat your clients in such a fashion?"

"Only when *they* deserve it," I said. "I agreed to do one thing for her and that's all. If she expects more, that is not my fault—but I don't run a bureau for baby- or widow-sitting."

"What have you learned?" she asked.

"Not much," I admitted. "I talked to some of the people who were at the party last night, but most of them sound guilty of no more than grabbing a free feed. There were a couple of guys who didn't sound quite right, but that may not mean much."

"What about the police? Don't they have anything on it?"

"Not a thing. They think it's tied in with some other jewelry robberies down here, but they don't have a single lead. It might be the work of just one guy or a small gang."

"What do you think?" she asked.

"I think maybe a gang," I said. "I believe that I must have been watched this morning and when I came here they guessed I was being hired. Anyway, I got a call offering me a mysterious job that would take me out of town. The caller gave me a name and a hotel where he was staying but the hotel had never heard of him when I called. So I think it was someone who wanted to get me off the job."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Keep on plugging away until I get something. That's what this business is. It's not the trenchcoats, the fancy joints and the beautiful broads like on TV; it's just hard work."

"Is that what I am?" she asked with a smile. "Part of the hard work?"

"Good heavens, no," I exclaimed. "You're the beautiful broad—just like on TV. In fact, I'm refusing to switch channels just because of that."

We finished our drinks and went out and got in the Cadillac. We had a good dinner in the best restaurant in Miami Beach and then we went to a club where we could dance. Susan was more than beautiful; she was also interesting. I had more fun than I'd had in months. It was three o'clock in the morning before I knew it. We left the club, stopped off at a little place for some waffles and coffee and then I drove her back to the Hapsburg. She wouldn't join me in the bar for a nightcap and she wouldn't let me go upstairs with her. She wasn't even certain she would have dinner with me the next night, but she promised to think it over. And that was all. She put her hand on mine and said good night in her throaty voice and then she was gone. And there I was: sweet thirty-six and never been kissed—lately.

I turned down on Collins Avenue and drove downtown. It was only a few blocks to my office and apartment. I parked the Cadillac in front of the office—just behind a taxi. I wondered what the taxi was doing there, but didn't think much about it. I got out, locked my car and headed for my place.

"Mr. Draco," a voice called. There was no mistake. The voice had called my name and it was definitely the voice of a woman. I turned around.

A girl was getting out of the taxi. As soon as she slammed the door, the taxi took off. She turned and came toward me. I recognized her at once. She was the blonde I had danced with the night before. The one who had made dancing seem more like a conflagration.

"Mr. Draco," she said, "I've been waiting for you. I'm Jane Benedict."

I glanced at my watch. It was almost four in the morning.

"I've been waiting a long time," she said.

"You must have," I said. "Why?"

"Well, I heard you wanted to see me," she said. "And I thought if it were important enough for you to come to my hotel, I really ought to come and see you and find out what you wanted."

It was all very interesting, but it was difficult to concentrate on what she was saying. Jane Benedict was quite a woman almost any way you looked at her—and it was impossible to not look at her. Also, she was wearing a perfume that was reaching out and doing all sorts of things to me.

"I didn't mean to put you out this way," I said.

"Oh, I don't mind," she said. "I knew it must be important." She looked at me expectantly and that seemed to leave it entirely up to me. I tried to be worthy of the responsibility.

"Won't you come upstairs?" I asked. "We can talk there better than here on the street."

"I'd love to," she said.

There's an outside stairway to the apartment above my office and I escorted her up the steps. I unlocked the door, reached in and flicked on the lights and stood aside. She stepped in and I followed.

"Oh, it's lovely," she said, standing in the center of the living room and looking around. She was as wide-eyed as if I'd just escorted her into Buckingham Palace.

"It's just something I whipped up out of an old estate," I said lightly. "Can I get you a drink?"

"I'd love one," she said.

"Scotch, bourbon or VO? On the rocks, with soda or with water?"

"I'll have whatever you're having." She walked across the room and sat on the couch. Watching her walk was an experience in itself.

I went into the kitchen and poured a couple of drinks. I carried them into the living room and put them down.

"Will you excuse me a minute?" I asked.

"Of course," she said. Her eyes opened wider. "I hope I'm not intruding or anything like that."

"No," I said. "There's seldom much activity around here at this hour. I just want to check on something. Make yourself at home."

I went downstairs to the office. There had been an afternoon mail delivery, but the only things on the floor were a few bills and circulars. I tossed them on the desk. I picked up the phone and dialed the number of my answering service. By this time, they were accustomed to me calling at all hours, so the girl showed no surprise when I asked for messages. There were six of them—all of them from Mrs. Thorney, wanting me to call. I thanked the girl and hung up.

I went back upstairs and stepped into the living room. Then I stopped. Something new had been added—or, rather, subtracted.

Jane Benedict was still sitting on the couch, sipping her drink. But she had made herself comfortable. She was no longer wearing her shoes or her dress. In fact, all she was wearing was a black bra and black panties. Both were completely transparent.

CHAPTER 5

THERE ARE, of course, many kinds of women, but in terms of a man's ideals you can say there are only two. There is the woman who is beautiful in her man's eyes—and perhaps in the eyes of the world, too—who is understanding and sympathetic and who is always warmly tempting and exciting. This is the woman, if you find her, with whom you settle down for life and find every day and night a delight. The man who finds a woman like this never strays very far.

Then there is a second ideal. This is the woman who steps out of a Petty cartoon or out of the dreams of a lonely sleep. All the attributes of a woman are exaggerated to the point of no return. She's the woman that even happy men dream about but only in terms of a wild week end in Atlantic City or on the Riviera. She's too much of a good thing on the outside and usually not enough on the inside. Men will usually envy you the first kind of woman, and even try to get her away from you, but they'll want to kill you if they see you with the second kind. That's because all men realize she's only a dream and has no right to exist in the flesh.

Well, Jane Benedict was the second kind.

"You said I should make myself at home," she said, breaking into my reverie. "This is the way I always sit around at home."

"A very delightful native custom," I said. I went over and sat down on the couch. I picked up my drink and noticed with detached interest that my hand was shaking slightly. "If I looked like you, I don't think I'd wear anything, either."

She giggled. "Actually, I usually don't—when I'm at home. But I was afraid I'd shock you."

"Oh, no," I protested weakly. "I'm very tolerant of other people's habits. In fact, I—"

She laughed again. "You talk so much," she said. "Why don't you kiss me?"

There was only one thing to do. I did it.

By the time we broke off that first kiss, I'd lost all interest in the drink that was in front of me. I came up for air and tried to get my eyes into focus.

"What was it," she asked dreamily, "that you wanted to talk to me about?"

"I don't remember," I said honestly. "Besides, you talk too much."

She took the hint.

Despite the time I finally went to sleep, it was still fairly early when I awakened that morning. Jane was still asleep, her body looking like a sculpture left behind by a careless Greek. I went into the bathroom and showered and shaved. Then I headed for the kitchen. On the way through the living room I noticed that our two drinks were still standing there, tepid and neglected. In the kitchen, I had a good strong shot of tomato juice and got the coffee going. When it was ready, I went back into the bedroom.

She hadn't moved. I sat on the edge of the bed and shook her by the shoulder until her eyes opened. Her face was completely blank as her gaze went around the room and then settled on me. It was the look of a person who is never sure where awakening may occur. After a few seconds, she put all the pieces together and then she smiled.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good morning," I answered bravely. "Coffee is ready if you'd like to come into the kitchen and have some."

"I'd love to," she said. It began to seem that that was her favorite expression. I wondered if she'd memorized it as a substitute for the usual yes.

"Come in when you're ready," I said. I got up and went back to the kitchen. I got down the cups and saucers and

put them on the table. I took the plug out of the coffee pot. I poured some tomato juice for her and then poured out my own cup of coffee. I added sugar and tasted it.

Then I almost burned myself. Jane came strolling into the kitchen in exactly the same state she had been sleeping in. That is, no clothes. She sat down opposite me and drank her tomato juice while I tried to concentrate on my coffee.

"You're sweet," she said then.

I mumbled something under my breath and poured coffee for her. I pushed the cream and sugar in her general direction, trying to keep my gaze on less disturbing objects. I was reminding myself that I had work to do.

"I bet you think I was awfully bold last night," she said.

"Well—no," I said. I had the feeling that I wasn't being exactly brilliant.

"I'm glad I was," she said. "It was lovely." There was that word again.

"I thought so, too," I said fervently. I scalded my throat with some hot coffee which helped me to achieve something close to reason. "You know, I wanted to ask you some questions. That was why I came to see you yesterday."

"Oh, of course," she said. She laughed. "That was why I came here last night and waited for you."

"I appreciate it," I said gravely. "Did you know the Thorneys before the party last night?"

"Well, not really. I met them night before last in a bar and that was when they invited me, but that's all. I was with Mr. Urbino and Mr. Novelle. Didn't they tell you?"

"They told me. How long have you known them?"

"Only since I've been at the hotel. They're very sweet."

"I'll bet," I muttered.

She laughed. "Why, honey, I believe you're actually jealous," she said. "I think that's just—"

"Lovely," I finished for her. "Did you know any of the other people at the party before last night?"

She shook her head.

"What are you doing in Miami Beach?" I asked.

"It's my vacation, honey."

"Where are you from?"

"New York."

"What do you do in New York?"

"I'm a hostess in a restaurant."

"What restaurant?" I asked.

"The Blue Seal. It's uptown on the East Side, in Manhattan."

That was enough to check on. I leaned back and took a sip of my coffee. "Have you been enjoying yourself in Miami Beach?" I asked.

"Oh, it's been lovely," she said.

I winced. "What have you been doing?"

"You know, everything. Swimming, dancing. . . ."

"Playing the races?"

"Oh, no," she said strongly. "Whatever made you think I would do that?"

"Most people who come down here do."

"Well, not me. I think gambling is just terrible."

"It's nice to know that there's something that isn't lovely." I glanced at my watch. "Honey, everything has been—as you would say—lovely, but I'm a working man. You'd better go back to the hotel."

She pouted, but immediately stood up and walked out of the kitchen. That was almost a mistake. Watching her walk across the kitchen was not the way to keep my mind on business. But I let her go. I gave myself a good lecture on moderation and then I went downstairs to the office.

The mail had been delivered. There was the usual number of bills and circulars, but there was also a check for five hundred dollars from Katherine Thorney. I gazed at it with love. I put it away and called my answering service. There had been two calls. Both from Katherine Thorney. I sighed heavily and dialed the number of the hotel. When the operator answered, I asked for Mrs. Thorney.

"Pete Draco," I said when she answered.

"Oh, Pete," she said. Her voice sounded like a forecast of wet weather. "Why haven't I heard from you?"

"It's only twenty-four hours since you hired me. That's hardly enough time to solve a case."

"You know I didn't mean that," she said reproachfully. "I called you several times yesterday. Didn't your answering service tell you?"

"They told me."

"But I needed you, Pete. I needed you so badly. Why didn't you return my calls?"

"I had nothing to report."

"Will you come over to see me now?"

"No. I have to get to work."

"But I need you. I'm all alone, Pete."

"I told you when you hired me," I said, "that the services did not include hand-holding. I'm working at the job for which you hired me and that's all I have time for."

"You had time to take Susan Siena out last night," she said accusingly. "One of the bartenders told me you did."

"When you hire a private detective it does not mean that you've bought him. If you don't like the way I'm working on the case, I'll mail your five-hundred-dollar check back to you."

"No, no," she said. "I didn't mean that."

"Then if you'll excuse me, I'll get on with the work."

"When will you come to see me?"

"When I have something to report."

"Be kind to me, Pete. I have been through such a terrible experience."

"I know," I said, "and I'm doing the only thing I can for you. Good-bye." I hung up and turned back to my desk.

I intended seeing the people I'd missed the day before, but first I wanted to get someone started checking them back in New York. There was an investigator there that I sometimes used. I had just found his number when I heard the steps coming down from my apartment. I looked up. It was Jane. She was dressed as she'd been the night before.

"So this is where you work?" she said. "Why, I think it's lovely. I always supposed that private detectives worked in grubby little offices."

"Only grubby little private detectives," I said.

She laughed and sat on the edge of the desk. "What are you working on?" she asked.

"The missing jewels, remember?"

"I meant what else."

"That's all at the moment."

"A big successful private detective like you?" she said. "Come on. You can tell little Janey about the other cases."

"Just one case," I said firmly. "And the only thing I can tell little Janey is to scram. Go play the horses, or something."

She slid off the desk. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, it's one way of keeping out of trouble. I'll even give you five bucks to put on one of the horses for me."

"I told you I don't have anything to do with horses," she said angrily. She walked to the door but there she stopped and looked back. "Will I see you again, Pete?"

"Sure," I said. "You'll be seeing me. I may even want to ask you more questions."

"If the method is always as interesting, I'll come running," she said. She opened the door and was gone before I could think of an answer.

I put in my New York call. It went through quickly and two minutes later my friend was on the phone.

"Hi, Eddie," I said. "Pete Draco."

"Pete, how are you?" he said. "What's up?"

"Not much. You busy?"

"Got a tailing job today but it should wash up before the day is over. Why?"

"I want a rundown on some people. Think you can do it?"

"Sure. What's the dope?"

"No addresses on any of them," I said. "Susan Siena, lives somewhere in Manhattan. Robert Urbino and Charles Novelle. They own a trucking business together. Or so they say. Jane Benedict. I do know where she's supposed to work. The Blue Seal Restaurant on the upper East Side. Betty and Roger Andrews, husband and wife. Edward Hayden. Fred Burton. Jeanne Marden and Judy Greene. That's the list and that's all I really know about them. Get me as much as you can. And I want a Coady special on this."

"Meaning what?"

"That I'd like to have the information in a day or two."

He groaned. "You don't want much, do you? All right, I'll see what I can do."

"Do that and call me," I said. "Give my regards to the boys in the back room the next time you go down to play liars' poker." I hung up.

I got out my list of names and went over it. There were still three persons who had been at the party I hadn't questioned yet. Jim Lane and Betty and Roger Andrews. Lane was the only one of the whole group who wasn't a tourist. He lived on a little side street in the lower part of Miami Beach. I went out and got in my car and headed downtown.

The address turned out to be a building right on the edge of the water, next to a dock for fishing boats. The ground floor was a gas station and a lunch counter. The upper floors looked as if the building had once been a lighthouse. I trudged up a flight of stairs on the outside and found a door with Lane's name on it. I knocked and after a while I heard footsteps inside. There was a fumbling at the door and then it opened.

The man who stood there wore a rumpled bathrobe and looked as if he'd just gotten out of bed. He also looked as if he hadn't been there very long. His eyes were red-rimmed with dark circles beneath them.

"Jim Lane?" I asked.

He nodded and then grimaced as if the effort had been painful.

"I'd like to come in and talk to you," I said.

"All right," he said. He opened the door wider and stepped back. I went inside and looked around. It was a nice, but messy apartment, with a winding staircase leading to the floor above.

"Had a bad night," Lane muttered. "Excuse me a minute." He started across the room, hesitated, then glanced at me. "Need a Bloody Mary. Can I offer you one?"

"No, thanks," I said. "But I will take the most important ingredient straight on the rocks."

"On the rocks," he said and went ahead to vanish through a door.

He came back a few minutes later carrying two glasses. One was nice and clear and the other dark red. He handed me the clear one and took a gulp from his own glass. His face worked as he struggled to keep it down.

"Hangover," he said just as if it weren't obvious. He took another drink and looked at me. "You look familiar. Do I know you?"

"Not really," I told him. "We met night before last at the Thorney party. I'm Pete Draco."

"I remember now," he said. "You were the guy with the old doll who threw the party."

"I'm the guy who was with the old doll," I admitted, "but I don't like your reading of the line. I got boxed off the minute I left the starting gate and I've been taking mud in the face ever since. I suppose you're one of the characters who told the cops I was playing footsie with Mrs. Thorney?"

"What if I did?"

"It's a good question. But since everyone else did it, too, I don't suppose I can take it all out on you. Just keep in mind that it's a sore point and we'll get along. I'm more interested in you."

"Why?" he asked. The Bloody Mary was beginning to work and he was coming back to the world.

"I'm a private detective and I've been hired by Mrs. Thorney to try to find her jewelry."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"I'm talking to everyone who was at the party the other night. You were one of them."

He glared at me for a minute, then grinned crookedly and reached for a cigarette. "Why not?" he said. "I've already talked to the cops so one more—private or otherwise—doesn't seem to make any difference. What do you want to know?"

"Everyone there was a tourist except you and me. Who and what are you?"

"Didn't you ask the cops?"

"Not yet, but I can."

He shrugged. "I have nothing to hide. I've lived in Miami Beach for the past ten years."

"What do you do?"

"I go to parties."

"I gathered that," I said. "I mean what do you do for a living?"

"Go to parties," he said with a grin.

"How do you make a living out of that?"

"Well, even at the worst there are always free dinners and drinks. Then there are a lot of wealthy female tourists who come down here alone. They usually want companionship and sometimes they want romance. I'm available in all categories." He gave me that crooked grin again. "That's why I thought I recognized you as a competitor the other night."

"Well, now you know better," I said. "How long had you known the Thorneys?"

"I met them at another party three or four days ago."

"That's when you were invited to their party?"

"Yes."

"How about the other guests? Did you know any of them?"

"I've seen one of the men at other parties. I think his name is Burton. But I don't really know him."

"What time did you leave the party?"

"When it broke up. Three o'clock, I guess."

"What did you do then?"

"I'm covered, if that's what you're thinking," he said. "I picked up a lady within fifteen minutes after I left the hotel and brought her back here. She didn't leave until noon the next day."

"Who is she?"

He shook his head. "I gave her name to the police, but I won't give it to you."

"But she'll swear that she was with you all that time?"

"If she has to. She's married so I asked the cops to keep her out of it if they can. Look, Draco, you're wasting your time. There are a lot of names you can call me —I've been called most of them—but there are two things I'm not. I'm not a thief and I'm not a murderer."

"Maybe," I said. "Did you notice any of the other guests showing special interest in Mrs. Thorney and her jewelry?"

He grinned. "You."

"If that's what you thought I was interested in," I said sourly, "then your powers of observation are pretty bad. All right, Lane. If I think of anything else, I'll get in touch. Thanks for the drink and all the words that didn't add up to anything." I stood up.

"Sure, they added up to something," he said. He stood up, too, and picked up his own empty glass. "They add up to the fact that I had nothing to do with it. All I got out of the old girl's party was a hangover almost as bad as the one I have today. And in case you do think about it later, don't come back. The cops can tell you that I wasn't anywhere near when those other jewel robberies were pulled."

"You know about them?"

"I ought to. The cops asked me enough questions about them. Now, if you don't mind, I think I've had about as much social life as I can stand this time of the day."

"You're not my type, either," I muttered, and I left. I hadn't gotten anything worthwhile out of him. That left two more on my list still to see: the husband and wife who were staying at the hotel.

I drove back uptown to the Hapsburg. I turned the car over to one of the boys and went into the lobby. When I called the Andrews' room I was told that they were out on the patio. I went out back. There were the usual number of heavily greased sun worshippers and a few hardy souls who dared the rigors of the heated pool. There were three men seated at the patio bar and several couples at the tables. One of the couples was Betty and Roger Andrews. I recognized them from the party. I walked slowly toward them.

She was a pretty little brunette, probably no more than five feet tall, and stacked. My guess was that she was in her late twenties. He was probably a few years older, tall and thin, with blond hair. Both of them were wearing bathing suits and beach jackets.

They glanced up as I neared the table. Their faces wore that uncertain expression that comes with knowing that someone is familiar but not knowing why.

"Hello," I said. "You probably don't remember me but we met night before last at Mrs. Thorney's party."

The uncertainty vanished from their expressions to be replaced by something else. I wasn't sure, but I thought it was fear.

"Oh, yes," Roger Andrews said heartily. Too heartily. "I recall meeting you but I'm afraid I've forgotten your name."

"Pete Draco," I said. "Mind if I join you for a moment?"

They glanced at each other but the hesitation was so slight that I wouldn't have noticed it if I hadn't been watching for it.

"Of course," he said. "Glad to have you."

Betty Andrews smiled. It was a pretty smile. I pulled out one of the chairs and sat down.

"I'm sorry to barge in on you like this," I told them. "I think it was mentioned the other night, but you may not remember—I'm a private detective. Mrs. Thorney has hired me to try to recover her jewelry."

"Yes?" he said. His voice was colder and, I thought, a little more nervous.

"I'm trying to talk to everyone who was at the party," I said. "There's always the chance that you might have noticed something—maybe someone who was paying a lot of attention to Mrs. Thorney and the jewels she was wearing, something of the sort."

"We didn't notice anything," Roger Andrews said promptly.

"Have you known Mrs. Thorney long?"

"Not long. We met her a few days ago and she invited us to the party. That's all."

"Know any of the other guests before?"

"No."

"And you didn't notice anything that was suspicious in view of what happened later?"

"Not a thing," he said. "We were just having a good time and thought everybody else was, too."

"It did seem that way," I admitted. "You two down here on your vacation?"

"Yes."

"From New York?"

"Yes."

"You in business there, Mr. Andrews?" I asked.

"Stocks."

"That must be interesting work," I said. "Got any good tips?"

For the first time, he smiled. "One of the best tips," he said, "is never to take tips from strangers."

I laughed. "That sounds like good advice. I'll remember it."

I took a last look at Mrs. Andrews' visible assets and left. In the lobby, I stopped and used the house phone to call Susan Siena.

"Pete Draco," I said when she answered.

"Hello," she said. "How's the sleuthing?"

"Nothing to get hysterical about. I've got four or five characters who seem a little shady, but that's all. And they can't all be guilty."

"How are the employer-employee relations?"

"Fine—because I keep her at the other end of a telephone. What about our dinner date tonight?"

"I guess so," she said. "Pick me up about seven."

"I'll be here if I have to wade through an army of jewel thieves and murderers," I promised, and hung up.

I got my car and drove down Collins to my place. I checked with the answering service but there were no messages. I went upstairs and brewed myself a cup of coffee and sat down to relax.

I didn't have much. There were four, maybe five, persons who didn't ring quite true. Urbino and Novelle didn't sound like the sedate businessmen they claimed to be. And something wasn't kosher about the Andrews. They had been entirely too nervous. The whole thing had been too pat. And then there was Jane Benedict. Maybe she was innocent and didn't know Urbino and Novelle more than they claimed, but why had she been so anxious to be questioned that she'd come to my place at three in the morning? And why had she stayed? I didn't believe that my charm was really that fatal.

A soft buzzer sounded from the kitchen. That meant someone had entered my office downstairs. I put down

my coffee, struggled back into my jacket and went down the stairs.

They were back. The same two men who had worked me over with the blackjack.

"Let's go," the short one said. "Someone wants to see you."

CHAPTER 6

SUDDENLY THE ROOM was full of tension. This was more than a social invitation. They'd already given me proof of that. What made it worse was that both of my guns were still in a desk drawer across the room.

"Who wants to see me?" I asked. "I don't go to see just anybody."

"You'll see this one," the tall man said.

"And I don't go out with strange men," I said.

The little one made a sound in his throat. "Let me work on him," he said. "He'll decide to go." His voice was high, as though it weren't anchored too firmly.

"He's cute," I told the tall one. "Too bad he's not my type."

The little one made that sound in his throat again. I couldn't tell whether that was his fighting sound or a sinus condition.

"Now, Maxie," the tall one said gently. He looked at me. "You shouldn't talk to Maxie like that."

"Then stop playing games," I said. "Tell me who wants to see me and maybe I'll go. Again, maybe I won't."

"You will," he said. "This is Maxie Layton and I'm Jack Enoch. Let's say that we want to see you until we get you to a place where somebody else wants to see you. You better let it ride like that and come along."

"Maybe he thinks he can take us," Maxie said. His eyes were bright and a little out of focus.

"You I could take," I told him, "if you let me get my gun or you put yours to one side for a couple of minutes."

"Let him try, Jack," Maxie said. "Let him try." The

corners of his mouth were wet and glistening.

"No," Jack said firmly. "You stop it, Draco. And get moving. Now."

He wasn't going to stall any longer. I cast a last loving look at the desk where my guns were and moved. Out through the door.

It was a typical early evening in Miami Beach. Collins Avenue was crowded with Cadillacs, Lincolns and cabs filled with tourists. Across the street a group of women, in flowered shorts that made them look like migrating circus tents, moved from shop to shop. But nobody paid any attention to the two characters herding me out of my office.

I headed for my own car, but Jack Enoch nudged me. "We're going in our car," he said. He indicated a black sedan parked in front of my car.

We climbed in. Maxie was driving and they put me in the middle and then Jack climbed in. Once he was there, he took the gun from his shoulder holster and held it in his lap.

"Don't get any ideas," he said.

"Not me," I said. "Just tell your little chum here not to get any. Sitting this close to him is all right if he keeps both hands on the steering wheel."

"Just keep it up, Draco," Maxie said. "Just keep it up."

"What'll you do? Hit me with your powder puff?"

He started the motor, gunned it savagely and pulled away from the curb with squealing tires. He made a right turn at the next street, then another right turn when we hit Alton Road and then we were headed uptown again. But not for long. We pulled into a parking space and stopped. Maxie killed the motor and got out. Jack got out on the other side, slipping his gun back into its holster, and motioned to me.

"Come on, Draco," he said.

"The end of the line?" I asked. I was puzzled. I didn't think there could be anyone living around there who would have two trained gunmen working for him.

"Not quite," he said. "Just a change in our method of traveling."

We crossed the street, one of them on either side of me, and went down to the edge of Biscayne Bay. There were several motor launches docked there. Jack Enoch motioned for me to step aboard one of them. I obeyed and they followed me.

"I thought this sort of thing had gone out of fashion," I said, "along with concrete shoes."

"Don't get any ideas or we might bring it back," Jack Enoch said. "Let's go, Maxie."

The little gunman went forward and started the motor. He threw off the mooring rope and the boat swung away from the dock. We headed out into the Bay in the general direction of the Sunset Islands. For the first time I began to get an idea about where I was being taken—but it still didn't make too much sense.

One of the islands out in the Bay was owned by a man named Phil Driscoll. He'd bought the island a few years earlier and had a half-million-dollar house built on it. This was neither bigger nor smaller than some of his neighbors, but there was one thing different about Phil Driscoll. He'd made his money in the rackets and it was generally known that he was a part of the crime organization usually known as the Syndicate. An important part of it. Whenever anyone asked him directly, Phil Driscoll always claimed that he had retired but newspapers frequently got stories out of the amount of boat traffic to and from Driscoll's island. And he was just the kind of man to have Jack and Maxie working for him.

Maxie eased the motor launch into the private dock of the island and moored it. He cut the engine and climbed out. Jack Enoch motioned for me to follow him.

"Phil Driscoll's place," I said as I obeyed. "Why didn't you tell me instead of all the mystery about where we were going?"

"We play it the way we're told to," Enoch said. "You'd be smart to do the same."

"I don't play around in his league," I said. "What does he want to see me for?"

"I imagine he'll get around to it. The side door, Maxie."

Maxie led the way around the side of the big house,

with me following and Enoch bringing up the rear. Maxie opened a door with a key and we went down into the basement. Only it was a case of reverse snobbism to call it a basement. The room we entered was fixed up to rival any swank office. There was a big mahogany conference table with matching chairs. Then there was a lot of other expensive furniture including twin couches. At one end there was an elaborate bar. There was a TV set and a stereo player. Then, in case the board of directors got bored, there were a couple of slot machines in one corner of the room.

"Sit down," Jack Enoch said to me. He motioned me toward a chair against the wall.

"Gee," I said as I sat down, "it's just like in the movies. Are you two guys on the board of directors?"

"Shut up," Maxie said savagely. "I've had all of your lip I'm going to take."

"Easy, Maxie," Enoch said. He went over and picked up one of the phones. He waited a minute, until someone must have answered. "We've got him down here, Boss. . . . Okay." He put the receiver down. He crossed the room and sat in a chair near the door.

"The Boss'll be here in a minute. Relax, Draco."

"You mean I don't get a whole board meeting?" I said. "It's humiliating. What will the boys say?"

"Maxie has a point," he said. "Shut up until the Boss gets here."

I lit a cigarette and leaned back in the chair. I had needled them about as much as I could and it was obvious they weren't going to give out any free information. So I waited.

The cigarette was about half-smoked when the door opened and a man came in. I recognized him from pictures I'd seen in the newspapers. It was Phil Driscoll. He was somewhere in his early fifties and still in good condition despite being a little overweight. He was wearing the uniform of a Florida gentleman, including the sport shirt with the tail on the outside.

He paid no attention to either of his two men as he marched across the room to seat himself at the head of the conference table. He took out a cigar and lit it

with a gold lighter. When it was finally burning smoothly, he put away the lighter and for the first time looked directly at me.

"You're Draco?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Know who I am?"

"Yes," I said again. "Phil Driscoll. I recognized you from pictures I've seen in the papers."

"You did, huh?" He sounded pleased. "Know why you're here?"

I shook my head. "I can't imagine. I don't know of anything I've worked on that was important enough to be stepping on the toes of a man as big as you are."

"You're a private dick?"

"You must know I am. Your men picked me up in my office."

"You're working on a case now?"

I nodded.

"What is it?" he asked bluntly.

"The jewel robbery and murder at the Hapsburg Hotel the other night."

"That the same case you were working on a couple of days ago when a man called and offered you a job?"

"The same case," I said. "Was that you?"

"Somebody who works for me. What other cases you working on, Draco?"

"That's the only one."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

He shook his head. "Suppose I told you that I heard you were working on another case?"

"I'd have to say that your information is wrong."

He rolled the cigar around in his mouth, took it out and stared at the ash. Then his glance came back to me with about the same amount of expression.

"I got nothing against you, Draco," he said. "I figure as long as a guy can make a buck, let him—just so he don't step on my feet. So there ain't anything personal in this. But I want you to get off that case you're on and maybe take a vacation."

"I don't get it," I said. "That was a pretty big jewelry

heist, but certainly not big enough for a Phil Driscoll. And you're too smart to go after the small stuff."

"Of course, I'm not sap enough to pull a job like that," he said. "I had nothing to do with it."

"Then maybe you're protecting one of your boys who did it," I suggested, looking at the two who were in the room with us.

"I give you my word that none of my boys pulled it. They don't pull anything unless I tell them to."

"Then I still don't get it. . . ."

"It's simple," he said. "I want you to lay off. Take a nice vacation somewhere, maybe up north. Now, I know vacations cost money, so I'll take care of it. I figure a guy can have a nice vacation for maybe five grand."

"A very nice vacation," I admitted, "but five grand sounds a little too rich for me. It might give me indigestion. I think I'd better stick on the job."

His eyebrows went up about a quarter of an inch. "You know, I checked on you, Draco. I was told you were an honest John, but I didn't believe it. Would ten grand change the picture?"

"No."

"Okay," he said. "I've met honest Johns before. Most of them don't live long, but they do exist. What do you want?"

"To solve the case and collect my fee."

"Okay," he said again, "let's talk about it this way. You stay home and entertain a broad or something and I'll deliver your case to you. My boys can break it in a day or two and we'll hand you the ice and whoever took it."

"Do you know who took it?"

He shook his head impatiently. "No, but I told you that my boys can find out."

"Tell me something," I said curiously. "If you or your boys had nothing to do with the jewelry job and the murder, why do you care whether I work on it or not? It can't hurt you."

"Let's leave it that I like you and want you to have a vacation."

"Even if I pulled off the job," I said, "the cops would

still be working on it. If I might stumble onto something, there's the same chance they will."

"Maybe," he grunted. "But unless it's a strong trail, the cops won't pay any attention. I know how cops work." He took a strong pull on the cigar and blew the smoke in my direction. "I learned something else about you, Draco. You're a smart guy. And nosy. If you ran into something, you'd want to find out what it was all about. That might be too bad for both of us—but worse for you."

"I still don't get it."

"But that's all you will get. Well, is it a deal? You lay low and we deliver your case for you?"

I shook my head. "I think I know how your boys would work. I'd rather handle it myself."

"Okay," he said again in that same toneless voice. "You don't want to take dough to lay off and you don't want us to deliver the case to you. Let's try a third way. Let's say that if you keep on working on the case it's going to make me sore."

There always comes a time when you have to show your hand. I decided that this was it. If I waited much longer, I might lose whatever nerve I had. I took a deep breath and went ahead.

"There are risks in every business," I said as lightly as I could.

"Meaning you don't care if you make me sore?" he asked flatly.

"Look at it my way," I said. "I'm working on a case which you tell me you had nothing to do with. It's the only case I'm working on. So I'm no threat to you in any way. And in that case, I can't let you come in and just push me around. Sure, you're a big man, but if you can tell me to lay off a case just because I might stumble onto something about you, then you can tell me to go out of business because in five years I might again stumble onto something. My business consists of not being pushed around. I don't dare let you, or anyone else, start pushing me."

"I like guys with guts, Draco," he said. "Don't I, Maxie?"

"Sure, Boss," Maxie said. He was grinning tightly.

"Show Draco how much I like guys with guts," Driscoll said.

Maxie started across the room toward me, his expression clearly stating that he had been waiting for this. I got to my feet and waited. I was probably going to get a beating but I wasn't going to hand it to them on a silver platter.

There was a flash of light as Maxie drew near and I realized he was wearing brass knuckles on his right hand. He moved in closer, stepping as daintily as a young filly, and swung a quick blow at my face. I was ready for it. I stepped back and let his fist swing harmlessly past my face. I waited until his arm had completed its swing, turning him half around. Then I stepped in and hit him hard just beneath the ear. He spun back across the room until his legs hit a chair, then he sprawled on the floor.

"I always told you that was a sucker punch, Maxie," Phil Driscoll said as calmly as if I hadn't just knocked one of his boys to the floor.

Maxie rubbed his jaw and stared up at me, his face full of hatred. Then he got slowly to his feet. He stripped the brass knuckles from his hand and tossed them on the floor. He reached in and pulled the gun from his shoulder holster.

"You ever been pistol whipped, Draco?" he asked. "If not, you've got something to look forward to." He started for me slowly, holding the gun lightly in his right hand.

The trouble was I had been pistol whipped and I wasn't looking forward to it. I knew I couldn't postpone it indefinitely but I was going to put it off as long as I could. I started backing up, watching him; if I could get inside his first swing, I might at least hurt him before he reached me.

But I'd forgotten one thing—Jack Enoch behind me. Suddenly there was a sharp blow, like a kick, in the small of my back. It sent me teetering forward, off balance, to meet Maxie. I didn't have a chance. I couldn't regain my balance and the barrel of his gun

caught me high on the cheekbone. I went down, my head ringing with pain.

I hit the floor, rolling to get away from him. I got to my feet and turned, looking for him. My eyes were still unfocused from the blow, but he would have been too fast for me, anyway. I got a blurred vision of him moving and tried to throw up my arm. The barrel of the gun got my other cheek and my nose. It hurt even worse than the first one. I went down again, grimly holding on to the thought that I had to get up fast. But I lost it a second later when something crashed into my ribs, driving the breath from me in a hoarse gasp. I knew what it was; he'd kicked me. I tried rolling away again, but there were more kicks. I knew there were six or seven but then I lost count. I was barely holding on to the rim of consciousness when I heard a voice as from a great distance.

"That's enough, Maxie."

The blows stopped but I wasn't even sure of that for a few minutes. The pain was still there, all over, and all I wanted to do was slip away from it, but I knew I had to stay conscious. I moved a little on the floor, feeling the waves of pain. I didn't think anything was broken but I knew that wouldn't make much difference in the way I felt for the next several days.

"Get him to his feet," the voice said again. This time I recognized it as Driscoll's.

Hands grabbed me from either side and lifted me to my feet. I almost passed out again, but gritted my teeth and held on. I knew it was Maxie on my left side. I could tell by the sound. He was breathing like a man who had just been interrupted with a woman.

"Can you hear me, Draco?" Phil Driscoll asked.

"I can hear you," I said. My own voice sounded as if it were coming from someone else.

"The boys will take you home now," he said. "Get a good night's sleep and then tomorrow think over what I suggested tonight. You remember what it was."

"I'll remember," I said. I was going to remember everything about that night for a long time.

"All right, boys. Take him home and no more rough

stuff. I think he's had enough for now."

He was right about that, too.

The two of them pushed me between them out through the door and up the stairs. The night air revived me a little more but it didn't help the pain any.

Finally we were at the boat and I was sitting down. The motor roared and I could feel it moving. I think I passed out a little then for the next thing I remembered they were helping me out of the boat and we were going toward the car. It was dark and the street lights seemed to be dancing. My eyes hadn't come back into focus yet.

We got into the car in the same way as before, with me in the middle. That's where I'd been all evening. Maxie got the motor started and we were under way. I heard a noise to my right but couldn't make out what it was.

"Here," Jack Enoch said. "Take a little of this and it'll make you feel better."

I groped to take whatever "this" was and discovered it to be a bottle. Whiskey, I hoped, as I tilted it to my mouth. It was. I let it pour down my throat until I could feel the burn in my stomach. I pushed the bottle back to him.

The whiskey did help. At least it revived me somewhat. My eyes must have uncrossed finally because the lights got steadier. I saw we were going down Collins Avenue and were almost to my place.

Maxie swung into the curb in front of my car and stopped. Enoch climbed out and held the door open for me.

"We'll be talking to you, Draco," he said.

"Maybe you will," I said as I got out, "but he won't. The next time I see that gay little partner of yours, it's going to be my dance. It's already written in my dance program, so just remember it." I staggered off toward my office.

The car pulled away as I got my key in the lock and turned it. I went into the office, flicked on a light and headed for the bathroom in the rear. I still wasn't walking too straight but I made it. I turned on the light and looked at myself in the mirror. I wasn't pretty. Both

cheeks were bloody and blood had trickled over my lips from my nose. Both eyes were beginning to turn black. I turned on the cold water and began splashing it on myself; my face was a little too tender to take any rubbing. Finally, the blood was mostly off and I took a towel and patted gingerly until my face was dry. I examined it again. Both cheeks were beginning to swell. I was going to be a beauty for the next few days.

I pulled up my shirt and examined my ribs. The skin was beginning to discolor already and it hurt when I breathed, but nothing seemed to be broken. I turned the light off and went back into the office.

The first thing I did when I sat at the desk was open the drawer and take out my .38 and shoulder holster. I made sure it was loaded. I wasn't going to be caught empty-handed again. I lit a cigarette and sat there for a minute, staring at the gun and thinking of ways to use it.

Then I remembered something. I glanced at my watch. It was nine o'clock. I'd been supposed to pick up Susan Siena at seven. I pulled the phone over and dialed the number of the hotel. The operator reported that Miss Siena's room did not answer. Well, I couldn't blame her. I hung up the phone and then I walked slowly up the stairs. Every step hurt.

When I reached the top, I turned out the office light, opened the door into my apartment and started to grope for the light switch before I realized the lights were already on. I certainly hadn't left them on. I took the gun in my right hand and stepped into the living room, looking around.

The visitor wasn't hard to spot. She was lying on her stomach on my couch, her feet up in the air and her chin cupped in her hands. She was humming to herself and smoking a cigarette. She had bright red hair and she was something to look at. All of her. She was completely naked.

She heard me come in and rolled over on her side to look up at me. "Why, honey," she said, "that's a hell of a way to greet a girl—with a gun. Now, you just put it down and come over here and keep Pepper company."

I had never seen her before. Like I said, she was something to look at and any other time I might not have done anything but obey her. But I wasn't exactly feeling romantic and the last few hours had induced in me a general suspicion of the whole world. And there was something else bothering me. There was a strong acrid smell in the apartment which I couldn't place.

"How did you get in here?" I demanded.

"The door," she said, waving at it. "It was unlocked. Don't point the gun at me, honey. It gives me goose pimples on my belly."

I let my hand fall to my side with the gun. "Who are you?"

"Pepper Barr. Don't just stand there. Come over and keep me company." She patted the couch.

"I still don't know who you are," I said. "Why did you come here?"

"Dolly Parrish sent me."

For the first time there was some daylight on the conversation. Dolly Parrish ran a string of high-priced call girls in Miami and Miami Beach. I'd never met her but I knew who she was.

"I didn't order a girl from Dolly Parrish," I said.

"I know, silly," she said, giggling. "I'm a present, all gift wrapped. Or maybe I should say gift unwrapped." She giggled again.

"A gift? From whom?"

"How do I know, honey? Does the gift ever know who sends it? Come on over. I won't bite—or if I do, you'll like it." She squinted, taking a better look at me. "Honey, what happened to your face?"

"I ran into one of those doors people are always encountering," I said. "I want to know about this gift business."

"Forget it, honey. You've been in a fight, that's what it is. I love men who can fight. I love to watch them. Will you fight for me some time?" She giggled once more.

Then I got it. The smell in the apartment, her giggles, the way she was acting and talking. The smell was marijuana and she was high on it. I should have caught it at once, especially from the way she was holding her ciga-

rette, but I wasn't at my best just then.

"Okay, Pepper," I said, "the party's over. Put your clothes on and get out."

"What?" she said, sitting up.

"You heard me, honey. Out. And quickly."

"If it's because you're cheap," she said indignantly, "I told you I'm all paid for."

"I don't give a damn if you're paid for three times over. Out."

"Maybe you think I'm not good enough for you."

"Honey," I said patiently, "I think you're good enough for me. I think you're beautiful. But I'm expecting company and I like to pay my own freight. Maybe some other time. But now get dressed and leave or I'll throw you out the way you are."

"Well!" she said. But she got up and went over to the chair where she'd left her clothes. She began putting them on, gracefully and speedily. Being high on marijuana, she probably thought she was doing it with tantalizing slowness.

When she was dressed, she put her hands on her hips. "You're making a mistake," she said. "The other way you could have had some fun."

"I'll take my chances on the mistakes," I said. I walked over and took her firmly by the arm. "I also meant it about getting out. Come on." She scooped up her bag from the chair as I pushed her toward the door. I opened the door that led to the outside stairs and gently shoved her through. "Good night, honey. I'll call you the first night I'm lonely."

"I don't—" she began.

"Good night," I said firmly and closed the door.

I leaned against it for a minute. I still felt like hell. Then I went back and opened all the living room windows wide. I looked in the ashtray beside the couch. There were three cigarette butts there, the last one still smoldering. I carried the ashtray into the bathroom, emptied it into the toilet and flushed it. I took the ashtray back into the living room. All the time I was wondering why anyone wanted to frame me with a call girl who was high on marijuana.

I got out the phone book and leafed through it until I found the number listed for Dolly Parrish. I dialed the number. A girl answered and wanted to know who was calling.

"Tell her a sucker named Pete Draco," I said.

The girl went away and after a moment there was another voice on the phone. It was a woman's all right, but almost as deep and husky as a man's.

"Hello, Pete," she said. "Did you call me up to thank me for Pepper?"

"Not exactly," I said. "How come you sent her?"

"Why, a friend of yours paid for her to come over."

"What friend?"

"I don't know his name. He phoned first and asked about the most beautiful redhead I had. That's Pepper. I told him her price and then he sent the money over by messenger."

"And you sent Pepper over—without even knowing who ordered her."

"That often happens," she said. "Somebody wants to give a friend a present. Why? Is something wrong?"

"Did you know Pepper smokes marijuana?"

"Well—she gets a little high once in a while but most customers think that makes her more interesting. What's wrong? You didn't like Pepper?"

"I don't know," I answered truthfully. "I just threw her out."

"Why?"

"I don't like presents from strange men. Tell me something else. When I got home I found her already in my apartment. She said the door was unlocked. I know this wasn't true. You know anything about that?"

"Why, yes," she said. "That was the only thing that was a little odd about the transaction. The man said he wanted to surprise you. He described your apartment with the outside staircase and said he'd arrange to have the door unlocked and Pepper was to just go inside and make herself at home. Now, what's this all about, Pete? I run a straight business and I don't like dissatisfied customers—which is what you sound like to me."

"That might be one way of describing me," I ad-

mitted. "I think somebody had a frame in mind. I think that before too long there will be a knock on my door and someone will be there who expects to find me shacked up with a lady of loose morals who has been smoking marijuana. If nothing else, it would make a nice newspaper story. I might have been smoking some of the cigarettes myself since there would be several butts around and—"

I had a sudden idea and put the phone receiver down without even bothering to say good-bye. I went over to the couch and yanked all the seat cushions out. My sudden idea had been right. There were a dozen neatly hand-rolled cigarettes there. One sniff told me that they were marijuana.

I took them into the bathroom and flushed them down the john. I went back, replaced the cushions and started going over the rest of the room. I felt that I didn't have much time, but I tried to make it as thorough as possible. Then the phone rang. I picked up the receiver and said hello.

"Pete Draco?" she asked. It was Dolly Parrish. There was no mistaking that husky voice.

"Sorry I hung up on you before," I said.

"I thought we were cut off," she said, "so I took a chance on looking up your number and calling you back. In doing so, I discovered you're a private detective."

"That's related to the frame," I said. "I hung up on you because I had an idea and didn't think I had much time. I was right about the idea. I found a number of marijuana cigarettes stashed in my furniture. There may be more for all I know."

There was a moment of silence. "I'm sorry," she said. "I do run a straight business and I assure you that I had nothing to do with what you've just mentioned."

There was a heavy knock on my door.

"I was right about the second thing, too," I said. "Someone is now knocking on the door. I'll talk to you some other time."

"Cops?" she asked.

"Probably," I said. "The D.A. doesn't like me so he'd welcome a tip."

"Then that makes us friends," she said with a little laugh. "Good luck."

The knock was repeated, this time heavier.

"Thanks," I muttered into the phone and hung up.

I lit a cigarette and took a last look around the room to see if anything looked out of place. I hadn't had a chance to really cover this one room, to say nothing of the bedroom and the kitchen. But my time had run out.

The knock came for a third time.

"Come on, Draco," a voice called. "We know you're in there."

"Coming," I called. I picked up the gun from where I had tossed it several minutes earlier and went over to the door. I opened it and looked out. Three men stood there. There was nothing to show that they might be cops except that they all had that arrogant look that only cops can achieve when knocking on someone's door in the middle of the night. I didn't know any of them.

"Peter Draco?" the one in front asked.

"Yes," I said. "But it's after office hours. You'll have to see me tomorrow."

"We'll see you now," he said. "We're coming in."

"Now, now, buster," I said. I brought the gun into view. "I told you the office is closed." I started to close the door but he stuck his big foot in it.

"We're coming in," he said again. He moved his coat so I could see the badge and also the gun at his hip. "I'm Lieutenant Harry Seller, Narcotics Squad. These are my men. We also have, in the event you were about to bring it up, a search warrant."

CHAPTER 7

IT WAS WHAT I expected, but not exactly the way I expected it. As soon as I suspected a frame, I thought the cops would be coming, but I thought it would be someone I knew. Maybe Weston, maybe another cop. But this one I didn't know at all.

"Prove both counts," I said. "Anybody can buy a cheap badge in the nearest pawn shop or novelty store."

He didn't like it but he dug in his pocket and brought out his wallet. He flipped it open so I could see it. He was Lieutenant Harry Seller.

"So you're a cop," I said. "What about the search warrant?"

He put the wallet away and dug a paper from his coat pocket. He handed it to me. I opened it and read it carefully. It was the real thing all right. I handed it back to him.

"Please come in, Lieutenant," I said, stepping back and holding the door open.

The three of them came eagerly into the apartment. The lieutenant walked past me and looked around. I think he looked disappointed when he didn't see anything except an empty room.

"Check the other rooms," he ordered and his two men vanished into the bedroom and kitchen.

The second one was the first to return. He shook his head at the lieutenant's questioning gaze. Then the first one returned from the bedroom.

"Nobody around," he said.

"You're sure?" the lieutenant asked savagely.

Both men nodded. "I even looked under the bed and

in the closet," the first detective said.

"Were you expecting someone to be here, Lieutenant?" I asked innocently.

"No," he said angrily. He lifted his head and sniffed the air. "Marijuana! Where is it?"

"Well," I said, "the last marijuana I heard about in Miami Beach was a patch of it growing on an empty lot down near City Hall. Maybe you brought the smell with you. I hear the smell sticks when you're harvesting it."

He glared at me and turned back to his two men. "Okay, boys," he said. "Start looking for it. Don't forget that a lot of marijuana can be hidden in a small place."

The two men started going through the apartment. It was easy to tell by watching them that they enjoyed their work. I held my breath as they began, hoping I had found all of it that had been stashed there.

"Nervous?" the lieutenant asked me.

"No, curious," I said. "I didn't know that I was ever a narcotics suspect. I've been suspected of a lot of things but this is the first time on that score. I almost feel flattered—but which one of my dark deeds brought you down on me?"

"We had a tip," he said.

"A tip! I think modern police methods are so marvelous. Don't you, Lieutenant?"

He didn't answer.

"And I suppose our alert D.A. was very pleased at getting the tip?" I said. "I imagine the tip came from the usual anonymous public-spirited citizen?"

"I don't know," he said stiffly. "We investigate all tips that come in. That's part of our job."

"Sure," I said. "But why draw the line at marijuana? Why didn't you tell your men to keep an eye out for opium or maybe to shift through the sugar to make sure it isn't cocaine or heroin?"

One of the men gave me a startled glance and headed directly for the kitchen. I laughed.

"You'd better tell him," I said, "to just dump the sugar out after he's through. I don't think I'll want to be using it after he's been tasting every other spoonful."

The lieutenant looked at me. "You talk a lot. What

happened to your face? Have an argument with one of your partners?"

"My hobby is being a peeping Tom," I said. "Somebody opened the door while I was still looking through the keyhole."

His face got a little redder. "Look, Draco," he said, "I've been told that you have some friends on the Force. You might as well learn right now that it won't buy you a thing."

"Since when would a cop buy you anything?" I asked. "Unless you pay for the cop with more than friendship. By the way, Lieutenant, do you know Phil Driscoll?"

"I've heard of him. Why?"

"I'm just curious."

"What do you mean by that?" he asked angrily.

"Would I mean anything, Lieutenant?" I asked innocently. "I'm just curious about you. Who your friends are, things like that."

He turned away angrily and began helping the other cop search the living room. I had to give them credit for one thing—they were thorough.

They finished up a half hour later. One look at their faces was enough to tell me they hadn't found anything and I drew the first easy breath I'd had in more than an hour.

"What did you do with it, Draco?" the lieutenant demanded.

"Do with what, Lieutenant?" I asked.

He swore under his breath. "We know you had some marijuana here and I can tell you've been smoking it in this room."

"You shouldn't believe everything you hear, Lieutenant. Or even some of the things you smell. Well, it's been nice having you drop in for a spot of tea. It's too bad you have to rush off without any."

"For two cents I'd still take you in," he said.

"On what charge?"

"We could think of something."

"I'm sure you could," I said, "but nothing that would sound very good in the newspaper stories."

He scowled and motioned to his men. "All right,

Draco, you moved too fast for us this time, but we'll be keeping an eye on you. Don't forget that you can lose that slip of paper you have tacked on the wall of your office."

"I'm sure the D.A. will make sure I don't forget," I said. "Would you mind closing the door behind you as you go out, Lieutenant?"

He muttered something under his breath, but he followed his men out and slammed the door.

My face and ribs were hurting worse than ever. I went into the bathroom and got a couple of aspirins, then back to the kitchen and poured myself a stiff drink. I washed down the aspirins and headed back for the living room. The phone rang. I picked up the receiver and said hello.

"Pete?" a voice asked. I recognized it. Lieutenant Dick Weston.

"Yeah," I said.

"How is everything?" he asked cautiously.

"Well, I've been a little busy this evening," I admitted. "For one thing, three of Miami Beach's Finest just left."

"I just heard about the search warrant," he said. "I thought maybe I could reach you first. What's going on?"

"I wish I knew," I told him. "You know Phil Driscoll?"

"Not personally. He's a little too rich for my blood. But I know who you're talking about. What's he got to do with it?"

"Maybe everything. You know two of Driscoll's hoods named Jack Enoch and Maxie Layton?"

"I know them."

"They picked me up earlier tonight and took me out to see Driscoll. Guess what he wanted?"

"You to take over the operation of the Syndicate?"

"Funny man," I said. "He wanted me to stop working on the jewelry case."

"You mean he pulled it?" Weston asked incredulously.

"He says he didn't, nor did any of his men. Strangely enough, I believe him. He claimed that I might stumble onto something else that would interfere with his business. What does that mean to you?"

"Sounds like either an operation at the Hapsburg or something mixed up with one of the people involved with the case."

"Like maybe the dead man," I said. "If he were mixed up with Driscoll in any way, then I might stumble onto something. Got anything on him?"

"No. So far as we've discovered, he was completely legitimate. Certainly if Thorney was ever mixed up with gangsters, he kept it well concealed. What did you tell Driscoll?"

"What do you think?" I asked indignantly. "I said no. He offered a bundle of cash in the form of vacation money and then made a few threats as an alternative. I still said no, so he had his two boys work me over to help me think about it."

"Are you all right?" he asked quickly.

"Not exactly," I admitted. "I don't think anything is broken, but I'll be badly bent for a few days. And I haven't finished my story yet."

"Want me to have the two hoods picked up?"

"No. They'd just have alibis and lawyers waiting at the jail door. Anyway, they brought me back here a little more than an hour ago. I came upstairs and found a beautiful, red-headed, naked woman lying on my couch, smoking a marijuana cigarette."

"Who?" he asked.

"Pepper Barr. She's a high-priced call girl working for Dolly Parrish. The story was that some so-called friend of mine had called up and ordered her for me as a surprise."

"I don't know her name. What did she look like?"

"Pretty—with or without clothes."

"How old?"

"How the hell do I know?" I snapped. "I never look a gift whore in the mouth."

"Very comical," he said. "I see they didn't beat more than half your wits out of you. Maybe if I pick her up—"

"No," I said. "Not yet. Let's see what we can pick up first. Anyway, I smelled something wrong with the setup and I threw her out. Right afterwards I found a dozen marijuana cigarettes she'd hidden in my couch. I got rid

of them and just then the cops arrived with a search warrant. A Lieutenant Harry Seller. Know him?"

"Yeah. Narcotics."

"Who does he belong to?"

"I don't really know," he said. "Sometimes I've thought he'd been bought and other times I've thought he was straight. I don't honestly know, Pete."

"What does Driscoll do in the Syndicate?"

"The rumor is that he handles narcotics for the boys. But nobody has made a charge stick to him—as you damn well know."

"Well, somebody was trying to set me up," I said. "So far as I know, Driscoll is the only one who wants me off the case. Maybe he figured that a combination of a beating and a frame would take care of me."

"What good would it do him to get you off the case?" he asked irritably. "We'd still be on the case."

"I pointed that out to him but he seemed to think there was more danger of me stumbling into something."

"Well, I still don't get it. What are you going to do?"

"Stay on the case," I said. "But not until tomorrow morning. I'm too beat right now. And I do mean beat."

"Anything I can do—like sending over a doctor?"

"No, thanks. Rest will probably do more than anything else. I'll talk to you tomorrow. And thanks for the call."

"I probably should have my head examined," he muttered. "Take care of yourself, Pete." He hung up.

I replaced the receiver, waited a minute, then lifted it and tried calling Susan Siena again. She was still out. I put the receiver down and went into the bathroom. I took off my shirt and had a good look at myself. The two shiners were for real by this time and both sides of my body were a lovely blend of yellow, green and dark blue. I was in the middle of admiring the hues when the doorbell rang.

I went out to answer it without bothering to put on my shirt, but I did stop long enough to pick up my gun again. I went over and jerked open the door.

"I've stopped being—" I began and then broke off because it was Susan Siena standing there.

"I just wanted to see what could be so important that you'd stand me up," she said. "Now that I see that it doesn't seem to have been anything, I'll—" She got her first good look at me and stopped. "W-What happened to you, Pete?"

"Come in," I said. I waited until she was inside and I'd closed the door. "I had a small party with someone who wanted me to do something. I'm afraid it made me miss our date. I tried calling you as soon as I got away, but you were out."

"Oh, you poor darling," she said and her tone of voice made me feel better. "What have you done for the bruises?"

"Aspirin and whiskey."

"Men," she said. She looked around the room. "Lie down somewhere and tell me where your bathroom and your kitchen are."

"But—" I began.

"Do as I tell you," she said sharply.

"Yes, ma'am," I said meekly. I headed for the bedroom, pointing out the kitchen and the bathroom as I went. I stretched out on the bed and waited to see what she was going to do.

She came into the bedroom within a few minutes with towels and a big bowl full of ice cubes. She began putting ice cubes into towels and putting them on me.

"What happened, Pete?" she asked.

Underplaying it only slightly, I told her.

"You mean things like that really happen?" she asked when I'd finished. "It's so hard to believe. Can't you go to the police about it?"

"I've already told one policeman about it," I said. "If you mean go down and make a formal complaint, there's no point to it. The two hoods would be able to prove they were a hundred miles away and they'd have high-priced lawyers to back them up. Nothing would happen."

"What about this—this girl you found here when you got back?" she asked. "Can't the police talk to her and find out who sent her?"

"Maybe. They could pull her in and question her. They might get somewhere and they might not. Most

likely the latter. And if they didn't get anything, she'd probably disappear as soon as they let her out. Maybe permanently."

"It's so difficult to believe that such things go on," she said, shuddering. She looked at me. "What—what was she like?"

"Pretty," I said with a grin. "She was stacked in all the right places." I started to indicate with my hands but the effort made me wince with pain.

"Serves you right," she said. "You really threw her out?"

"On my Scout's honor," I said.

"What are you going to do, Pete?"

"Go ahead the same as before—except that I'm also going to have a small score to settle for myself."

"But you mustn't," she said. "You can't go up against men like that."

"I can try."

"Please, Pete," she said. "Please don't go on with the case. I—I don't want to see this happen to you again. It might even be worse the next time."

"It bothers you?" I asked.

"Of course it does."

"In between the spots where you've packed me with ice," I said, "roughly, in between my cheeks, north of my chin and south of my nose, there is a spot which you might kiss to prove that you mean it."

She laughed, then leaned over and kissed me on the lips. It was the best medicine I'd had.

"Then you will drop the case?" she asked.

"No, honey," I said. "Not even for you. Especially now."

Her eyes got dark again. "But I will worry about you."

"That'll help to make me more careful," I said. "But that's the way it has to be."

"All right," she sighed. "I suppose in one way I wouldn't want you to be different. But promise me you'll be careful."

"I'll be careful."

For the next hour or so, she kept putting the cold compresses on me, lighting me cigarettes and bringing

me drinks in between, and I was almost glad that I'd gotten beaten up. I couldn't remember when I'd had so much attention. The compresses helped, too. The swelling went down and the pain was less.

"Do you have an extra pair of pajamas?" she asked then.

"Yes. Why?"

"I'm going to stay and take care of you," she said. "Just for tonight. I'll sleep on the couch."

"Fine," I said, "but you don't have to sleep on the couch."

"On the couch," she said firmly.

So I told her where to find the pajamas, some clean sheets for the couch and gave her one of the pillows from the bed. While she was in the bathroom, I got into my pajamas and climbed into bed. My body and face were one big dull ache and I was beginning to feel sleepy.

She came out of the bathroom wearing my pajamas and looking quite desirable in them. She gave me a hasty kiss on the mouth and turned out the light as she went into the living room. I went to sleep almost immediately.

I only awakened once during the night. That was when she finally gave up about the couch and crawled quietly in beside me. It felt wonderful to have her there lying next to me.

She was already up when I awakened the next morning. I could hear her moving around in the kitchen. I went into the bathroom and looked at myself. I certainly wasn't any beauty. The bruises were nasty looking, but not as bad as they had been the night before. And much of the ache was gone. I stripped off my pajamas and took a fast shower. I went back into the bedroom and got dressed. Then I went into the kitchen.

She was already dressed. She'd dug out an old shirt of mine and had tied the arms around her waist, making a sort of apron out of it. She already had the coffee made and was frying bacon.

"You should have stayed in bed," she said. "Sit down and I'll have breakfast for you in a minute."

"Stay in bed and miss the sight of you slaving over a

hot stove for me," I said. "Not a chance. But my usual breakfast is much easier to make. It's coffee and a little VO."

"This is better for you," she said firmly. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," I said and I was only lying a little.

It certainly was a switch. Within a few minutes I was sitting and having bacon and eggs and coffee, with a beautiful woman sitting across from me. There was even toast. The whole prescription was so nice that I told myself I'd have to repeat it often. I even felt like facing the world when breakfast was over.

Even the best things must end. I lingered over the coffee but finally I had finished my third cup and I had to admit that it was time I was going to work.

"That was wonderful, honey," I told her, "but I guess I'd better get busy."

"I understand," she said. "I'll clean up the dishes and then go back to the hotel."

"Tonight?" I asked.

"You should stay home and go right to bed. . . ."

"Nonsense," I said. "It takes more than a little beating to keep a Draco down. What time shall I pick you up—that is, if you don't mind being seen with a man who has two black eyes."

"Of course I don't," she said. "Pick me up at seven."

"Okay. You going to be at the hotel all afternoon?"

"Probably. Why?"

"If I get tired of working, or if I'm not making any progress, I'll call you this afternoon and maybe we can make it a long date."

"We'll see," she said.

I let it go at that. I went over and planted a firm kiss on the back of her neck. Then I went into the other room, buckled on my shoulder holster and slipped the gun into it. I put on a tie and slipped into my jacket. All of it hurt but it was better than it had been the night before.

"See you later, honey," I called into the kitchen. Then I went down the stairs to my office. The mail was on the floor. But it didn't mean much. A few bills, a few circulars, an invitation to a cocktail party. I checked with

the answering service. Mrs. Thorney had phoned early that morning and left word for me to call. I decided to put it off for a while. Bruises *and* Mrs. Thorney were too much.

I decided to call my friend in New York. He'd had only twenty-four hours, but knowing him I thought he might already have everything I wanted. I put in a person-to-person call to him.

"Eddie," I said when he was finally on the phone. "Pete Draco."

He groaned. "I should buy back my introduction to you. You give me a whole bundle of checks to make and then you expect the report to be in five minutes before you made the call."

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Did I make you miss a night at Chumley's? You've had a whole twenty-four hours. Of course, if it's not enough time, I'll call you back in a day or two."

"All right, all right," he said. "You ready for the information?"

"I'm ready," I said. I pulled a pad and pencil over to me and grinned. I'd been pretty sure Eddie would have what I wanted despite the shortness of time. "Go ahead."

"Susan Siena," he said. "She's a dish, huh?"

"She's a dish," I admitted.

"That's the way I got it," he said. "She's twenty-eight years old. Was the only daughter of Horace and Eleanor Siena. Both parents died about seven years ago. The parents were not wealthy but were comfortably fixed. Susan inherited enough from them to keep the wolf away from the door. She has a small but nice apartment on the upper East Side. Pays her rent promptly. Pays all her other bills promptly. Has a comfortable bank balance. Runs around with a café society crowd, but is considered an oddball by them. Doesn't date the usual playboys or café society wolves. If she's had any affairs, no one knows about them. She's never worked and never had to. A good record everywhere. I gather she spends several months in Florida each year and at least two months each summer up in Maine. A nice way to live. That's about it."

"Fine," I said. I was conscious of feeling relieved that the report on her was the sort it was. "Go on."

"Jane Benedict," he said. "Another dish, huh?"

"Another dish," I admitted. "Different, but still a dish."

"Twenty-seven years old," he said. "Originally comes from the Middle West. Been in New York seven years. Worked as a secretary, a receptionist, a chorus girl in a couple of clubs, finally did a single in clubs. Not very good, all her talent being in her measurements. Presently working at the Blue Seal Restaurant as a hostess, now on vacation. Has an expensive apartment in midtown. Rumor is that she doesn't pay for it herself. Rumor also is that it isn't the first time that someone else has paid for her apartment. Has charge accounts at three department stores and these are always paid promptly —probably by the same person who pays the rent on the apartment. Nothing definite against her, but I think she's on the fringe of the underworld—as you will see."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll see when I come to it," he said.

"All right, be mysterious," I snapped. "Get on with it."

"Jeanne Marden," he said cheerfully. "Not a dish. Thirty years old. A secretary for the same firm for the past ten years. Comes from Philadelphia. Parents have no money. She barely managed to get through secretarial school, then had to go to work. Highly regarded by her employer. Lives in Greenwich Village in a rent-controlled apartment and saves most of her money. Dates very little. No bad associates. Nothing against her and not very much for her."

"Okay," I said.

"Judy Greene. Also not a dish. Thirty-six years old and getting a little desperate. Has worked for the past fifteen years for Lacey's Department Store. No known family or relatives. Lives in the Chelsea area in a moderate rental apartment and saves her money. Has a comfortable bank account. Pays all her bills regularly. Her only known luxury is a vacation, with the proper clothes, in Florida each year. A girl who works with her thinks she goes there each year hoping to get a husband.

Nobody has known her to go out with a man here in the past several years. The same girl who works with her thinks she's a virgin."

"I can fix it up with you to have a date with her when she gets back," I said.

"No, thanks. Moving on, we come to Edward Hayden. Fifty-two years old. Married and has two grown children. Both married and living alone. Hayden lives in Hicksville, Long Island, where he is a building contractor. Pretty successful. Makes about thirty thousand a year and lives within his income. Pays all his bills promptly. A deacon in his neighborhood church. Was on the school board for a number of years. A pillar of the community. So is his wife."

"Aren't they all?" I said bitterly.

"Not quite," he said. "This brings us to Fred Burton. The idle son of a wealthy father, although Fred seems to have run through most of the money that was left him. Fifty-seven years old, married four times, no children. Currently not married. Considered one of our leading playboys but I understand that the arteries are beginning to harden. Bad credit rating. Pays his bills only when he's dragged into court. Has a fondness for chorus girls and ladies of easy virtue. All of these things have led him to associate with a number of people of doubtful character, but there is no evidence that Fred himself ever indulged in illegal activities—except perhaps collecting pornography and such little sports as that."

"And you say he's broke?"

"Getting near to it, I'm told. Now, let's move on to Mr. and Mrs. Roger Andrews. Or Roger and Betty, if you prefer. Now, there's a fine pair."

"Oh?" I said. "He told me he was in stocks."

"He is, if you'll let him. Into yours, that is. I couldn't find out where they come from but, aside from that, Roger and Betty have fine, long records—but no convictions. Despite this, our friends down on Centre Street know them well."

"What for? Jewelry?"

"Sorry," Eddie said, "that's the one thing that isn't on the blotter. Actually, they're mostly known for some

form of blackmail. I think their favorite is the old badger game. No evidence that either one of them ever did a day's work in their lives."

That explained my feelings about them when I'd talked to them. But it didn't necessarily tie them in with the jewel robbery and murder.

"Now, we come to the prize package," Eddie said and I could tell by his voice that he'd deliberatly held this for the finale. "Robert Urbino and Charles Novelle. You said they owned a trucking firm here?"

"That's what they told me."

"Well, they do," he said. "Nobino Trucking Company. That's their front for labor racketeering—in which they work for the Syndicate. They also own a few other businesses—including the Blue Seal Restaurant which we've mentioned before."

"The one where Jane Benedict works?"

"The same."

"And one of them is the guy who is suspected of paying her rent?" I guessed.

"Wrong. That's supposed to be someone higher up. But she works for them and they work for the Syndicate. It's fast company you're traveling with, Pete."

"Sounds like it," I said. "But I don't get it. This is a jewelry and murder job and that doesn't sound like the Syndicate. But in the meantime, somebody else from the Syndicate is pushing me around to get me to lay off the case."

"Who?"

"Ever hear of Phil Driscoll?"

He whistled. "Boy, you are traveling with fast company."

"What do you know about him?"

"Not too much," he said. "He used to work out of Chicago for Joe Donetti. He was, and still is, the Syndicate boy in charge of all gambling. Driscoll was a strong-arm boy for him, but a few years ago he moved up the ladder and was admitted to the top circles. I've heard he runs narcotics."

"That's what I heard down here," I said. "Well, thanks, Eddie. I'll send you a check. I'll make it a little larger than

usual, so buy a round for the boys in the back room on me."

"Just a minute," he said. "I haven't finished yet."

"That's all the names I gave you," I said.

"Sure it is, but I've got one to give back to you. Urbino and Novelle have a third partner who left town the same time they did a few weeks ago. Maybe you haven't run into him, but you still might. His name is Jerry Morris."

"Jerry Morris? Haven't seen any sign of him."

"He's an electronics expert. Worked for the phone company until about two years ago when he was caught making a few phone taps for clients of his own. About six months later he showed up as a partner in an electronics shop along with Urbino and Novelle. They're still partners."

"What do they do?"

"On the surface, sell electronic supplies. A little below the surface, they do industrial and labor spying. Another layer down, they probably use their gadgets for all kinds of spying which will benefit anything the Syndicate does."

"Nice people," I said. "Well, thanks, Eddie."

"A specialty of the house," he said. "Let me know how it all turns out."

"If I live that long," I muttered and hung up.

I wrote out a check to Eddie, stuck it in an envelope, sealed and stamped it. I went out and got in the Cadillac and headed downtown. I stopped off to mail the letter, then drove on down to police headquarters and parked. I went in. Weston was in and I went straight back to his office. I sat down and told him everything that Eddie had reported.

"Thanks, Pete," he said when I'd finished. "I thought there was something wrong about Urbino and Novelle and the Andrews, but we didn't have anything on them. We'll keep an eye on them now. But I don't see either of them having anything to do with the jewelry case. Do you?"

"No," I admitted.

"From what you say," he went on, "the Andrews have always stuck to one sort of racket and they wouldn't be

apt to change now. In addition, they hadn't yet arrived here when the first job was pulled. And I can't see Urbino and Novelle or Driscoll involved. The Syndicate deals in too much big business to pull anything like that. I suppose they might protect one of their men if he were in on it, but somehow that doesn't ring any bells with me."

"Nor me, but what does that leave us?"

"Not much. We'll keep on digging on the jewelry case. Some of the stuff will have to show up somewhere sooner or later. In the meantime, I'm trying to look into the reason why Driscoll is afraid you might run into something. I think the best bet is that he had some kind of deal with Thorney. I've asked the New York cops if they have anything on him. I've also asked the FBI if they have a file on Thorney. We should hear from both of them within a few days."

"If a man like Thorney was mixed up with Driscoll, he was probably too smart to have a record."

"Maybe," he said. He was staring at my face. "That was quite a party you had with Driscoll last night from the looks of you."

"It had its high points," I said. "But there were times when I would rather not have been so popular."

"Why don't you let me pull them in?" he asked.

"You know the answer as well as I do," I said. "They'd have alibis we couldn't break and the whole thing would be a farce."

"Yeah," he said. "A hell of a note, isn't it? But maybe we could hold them long enough to give them a few lumps to match the ones that you have."

I shook my head. "Thanks, Dick, but you know damn well it wouldn't be worth it. It would only get you into trouble. Let me handle it my own way."

"Okay," he said gruffly. "Only don't handle it in such a way that I have to pull you in. Don't forget that the D.A. is still muttering about you."

I made a rude suggestion about the D.A. and stood up. My sides still hurt with every move. I suddenly decided to hell with it.

"What are you going to do now?" Weston asked.

"Take the rest of the day off," I said. "I just decided. I know that those story-book detectives are always getting beaten up and thinking nothing of it—but this boy hurts."

"If I pick up anything interesting, I'll let you know, Pete. Go on home and go to bed."

"I didn't say I was going that far," I protested. "I was thinking of taking a beautiful woman and spending the afternoon at the track. That should be soothing to my battered body and spirits."

"Some racket you're in," he snorted. "Well, get to hell out of here and let me go to work."

"So long, slave," I said and left. I stopped downstairs and phoned Susan. She said she'd love to go to the races and she'd be ready by the time I came to pick her up.

She was as good as her word for she was waiting at the lobby entrance when I pulled up in front of the hotel. I drove on up Collins Avenue until we reached Normandy, then over the North Bay Causeway and straight out 79th Street to Hialeah. We were just in time for the first race.

It wasn't a bad day. I ended up winning seventy-five dollars and Susan won twenty. When the last race was over we drove a couple of blocks, then stopped in at a place and had a long cool drink while we waited for traffic to drain off slightly. Then we drove leisurely back to the hotel.

Susan wanted to change before we started the evening. I told her I'd wait for her in the bar and she went upstairs. I went inside and climbed on a stool. Buck stopped polishing glasses and came over.

"Hello," he said. He whistled as he caught sight of my face. "What happened to you?"

"What you are looking at are known as curiosity bumps. A couple of hoods who work for Phil Driscoll."

He shook his head. "You don't care who you get mixed up with," he said. "You want a martini?"

"It might soothe the inner man," I said, nodding. "Although I doubt if it'll do much for the bruises."

He started making the martini. "The Thorney case?" he asked.

"Well, sort of," I said. I saw the expression on his face. "Stop looking wounded. I'm not being coy with you. That's the only answer I was given."

He poured the martini, twisted the lemon peel over it and put it in front of me. "It don't make sense," he said.

"But it made lumps," I reminded him.

"It sure did. You going to get off the case?"

"You know me," I said. "I'm thick. And I don't like being pushed around."

"Sometimes it's better than being carried around. You seeing the doll tonight?"

"This afternoon and tonight. We just came back from the races."

Some other customers arrived and Buck had to leave to serve them. The bar was beginning to slowly fill up. Buck and I didn't have a chance for more than a few words after that. I was working on my second martini when Susan arrived, looking even more beautiful than when she had left me.

We stayed at the bar through a couple of leisurely drinks and then decided to stay at the hotel and have dinner in the Bamboo Room. The orchestra was playing and as soon as we had a table we got up to dance before ordering.

We were about halfway through the number when someone bumped into me from the back. It was a hard enough bump to almost knock us off our feet. I looked around, expecting the usual apology. I saw a big, tough-looking man dancing with a flashy blonde. They didn't look like the usual Hapsburg tenants, but I didn't think anything of it at the moment.

"Watch where you're going," the man said harshly.

"I guess I'll have to," I said.

We circled the floor once—and then it happened again. Only this time harder. The blow knocked me against Susan and for a moment I thought we were going down. As soon as I was sure we had our balance, I let go of Susan and turned around. It was the same guy. He and the blonde had now stopped dancing and he was watching me.

"I thought I told you to watch where you're going," the man said.

"That's the second time you bumped into me from the back," I said. "What are you trying to do?"

"Trying to dance with my girl," he said, "and I don't like strange guys bumping into her."

The orchestra, as if they were afraid there was going to be trouble, was playing faster and louder.

"Maybe you make a habit of it," the man went on. "From the looks of your face, somebody else had to teach you a lesson."

I was beginning to get angry. "Look," I said, "I don't know who you are or what your game is, but you'd better knock it off right now. I'm not in the mood for your games."

"It's no game, pal," he said. "I was just planning on refreshing those two shiners you're wearing."

"I wouldn't try it," I said grimly.

"No?" he grunted. He pushed the blonde to one side and started for me.

CHAPTER 8

NOBODY WAS DOING much dancing by this time. As the man started for me, the couples quickly faded away on either side. The orchestra made a few clinkers and then faded out altogether. Over near the entrance to the room there was a little flurry of movement which I expected was the headwaiter either going for help or starting for us.

"Pete," Susan said from somewhere behind me.

"It's all right, honey," I said without looking around.

Then he was on me. He swung a vicious right at my head. I stepped back and let it go by, then quickly stepped in before he could recover. I jarred him with a left to the ribs that turned him back toward me, then sent a right to the corner of his jaw. He staggered back and sprawled on the floor. He looked up at me, his eyes dark with anger.

He got to his feet and moved slowly toward me. After what had happened, he wasn't going to make the same mistake twice, so I moved to meet him. I feinted for his head with my left, then drove a hard right into his body just above his belt. He bent forward slightly, his hands dropping. I swung another right from my knees, catching him full in the face. He went down again and this time he was bleeding. He got to his feet again, but this time his right hand was reaching inside his coat on the left side. I hadn't even noticed the slight bulge there before, but I saw it when he reached. I started to reach for my own gun, hoping I would be fast enough.

"Hold it—both of you," a voice shouted. "What's going on here?"

It was the hotel detective charging in through the tables. Then he caught sight of me and the expression on his face changed. It became even angrier.

"So, it's you, Draco. I should've known that if there was trouble you'd probably be around. All right—out!"

"This man started it," I said. "I was dancing with a young lady who lives here and this man started annoying us."

"I don't give a damn if you were dancing with the owner," the house detective said. "Get out."

"He's also carrying a gun," I said.

"So are you."

"I have a license. Does he?"

"I don't know and I don't care," the house detective retorted. "He's getting out, too. Nobody's going to come in here and act like they were in a joint."

"Let's go, Pete," Susan said.

"All right," I said. I took her arm and headed for the door.

"And if there's even one more incident, Draco," the house man called after me, "I'll see to it that you're barred for life."

I didn't bother to answer. My anger was gone by this time and my sides were hurting from the activity.

"I'm sorry, honey," I said as we went out into the lobby.

"It wasn't your fault," she said. "He didn't give you any choice."

"I know, but I didn't mean to embarrass you. Shall we go to the Embers for dinner?"

"Wonderful," she said.

We went out and got my car and headed down Collins.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

"I'll be damned if I know," I said. "I'm only sure of one thing. It was no accident. It wasn't just a guy with a low boiling point. He deliberately danced into us twice so that he could pick a fight with me. He must have been a hood; he was carrying a gun."

"Was he a friend of the men who beat you up last night?"

"I suppose he could be, but I never saw him before."

"Maybe he was going to kill you because you haven't dropped the case."

"I don't think so," I said. "If that was the plot he wouldn't have picked such a public place. I don't think he intended to use the gun at all, only at the last moment he got angry."

"But why?"

"I don't know, unless it was just another attempt to scare me off."

"How did he know where to find you? We didn't even know ourselves where we were going to have dinner until the last moment."

"He may have been following me. I haven't been checking on tails because I wasn't expecting any. I'll know better from here on."

I'd already been checking to see if anyone was following us from the hotel. I was pretty sure there wasn't.

"Pete, I'm frightened," she said. "Don't—don't you think you should stop working on the case?"

"Don't bother your pretty little head about it," I said. "I'll be all right. Nothing happened to me tonight."

"But the next time—"

"It won't then, either. And what happened last night won't be repeated. Now that I know what to expect, they won't get away with it."

"All right, Pete," she said meekly.

I pulled into the Embers parking lot and we went into the restaurant. It was crowded but we soon had a table. After a wonderful steak dinner, we went out and pub-crawled for a couple of hours. It was still early, but I took her back to the hotel then. I dropped her off at the entrance and headed back downtown. I was pretty sure that no one was following.

There was a cab parked in front of my office. I wondered if this one was waiting for the same reason the last cab had waited. I parked behind it and got out, keeping a careful watch in the event it was a different sort of surprise.

But I was right. The cab door opened and the blonde got out.

"I was waiting for you again," she said. "Is it all right?"

The cab pulled away down the block.

"I don't know," I said. "It's a little different now than it was the other night."

"I just had to see you."

"Why?"

She pouted. On her it looked good. "I just had to," she said. "Everything and everybody has been so boring since the other night. You said we'd see each other again but you didn't call."

"I've been busy," I said.

"Can I come upstairs?" she asked. "I won't bother you if you have to work."

"All right," I said. I decided I wanted to ask her a couple of questions. "Not much point to talking down here on the street. Come on."

I led the way up the outside stairs and unlocked the door. I wondered if there were going to be any little surprises for me this time. I flicked on the light. Everything seemed to be in order. I stood to one side and let Jane Benedict go in first. I followed her in and closed the door.

"I'm sorry if you're—" she started to say, turning to face me. Then she got a good look at me and she broke off, her eyes opening wide. "My goodness, what happened to you?"

"I told you that I'd been busy," I said. "What you see on my face are souvenirs from some men who thought I'd been too busy."

"You mean they beat you up?"

"That was the idea."

"Oh, you poor thing," she cried. She came over and touched my face with one hand. "Now, you just sit down and let Jane take care of you."

She led me over to the couch and helped me off with my coat. She pushed me back on the couch and touched my face again. "You poor boy," she said. "What you need is a drink. I'll get you one." She turned and hurried into the kitchen.

I had to laugh to myself. There was the difference between two women. The night before, Susan had put me to bed and put compresses on my bruises. Jane ap-

parently thought a drink and a womanly touch would do the trick.

She came back into the living room, carrying two drinks of whiskey on the rocks. She handed one to me and sat down next to me. At least she was still wearing all her clothes so I could concentrate on what was going to be said.

"Now, you just tell me all about it," she said.

"There's nothing to tell, honey," I said. "Some guys objected to something I'm doing and they roughed me up a little so I'd get the idea that they were displeased. That's all there is to it."

"Well, I think it's terrible," she said indignantly.

I laughed. "I didn't care too much for it myself," I said. "Now, there are a couple of things I want to ask you."

"Of course, Pete," she said. "Anything for you. I think you're just lovely."

I winced, but tried to ignore it. "Where was it that you said you work?"

"You mean in New York?"

"Yes."

"Why, the Blue Seal. It's a very lovely restaurant. Expensive. And all kinds of nice people go there."

"I'm sure they do," I said. "Who owns the restaurant, Jane?"

She stared at me for a minute, then laughed. "I can't possibly imagine how you know," she said, "but isn't it the funniest thing ever?"

"Isn't what funny?"

"Well, you know those two men I met at my hotel? Mr. Urbino and Mr. Novelle? The ones I went to the party with?"

"Yes, I know Mr. Urbino and Mr. Novelle," I said gravely. "I don't think I see anything funny about either of them."

"But it is," she said. "I never knew what they did for a living until yesterday. You know what they do?"

"What?" I asked. She was making me feel like the straight man in a burlesque show and I couldn't decide whether she was smart or dumb.

"They own the Blue Seal, the restaurant where I work," she said, going into more peals of laughter. "Isn't that the funniest?"

"A scream," I said. "And you really never knew this before?"

"Of course not," she said. "How could I know? They never go to the place themselves. I know Mr. Fisher, the manager who hired me, but that's all."

I couldn't tell whether she was lying or not. And I was beginning to realize that I was more tired than I had known. The day's activities topped off with the fight must have been too much after the beating. I handed her my glass.

"Give me another drink," I said. "Then I'm going to kick you out and go to bed."

"I'll tuck you in and then call a cab," she said. She took the glass and went into the kitchen. She was soon back with it refilled.

"Would you also be surprised to know that your two bosses are gangsters?" I asked.

"Gangsters? Oh, my goodness, you're kidding me!"

"No."

"But they don't look like gangsters. Not like the ones in the movies."

"Not like the ones in movies," I agreed. "But very much like the ones in real life."

"It seems so very hard to believe," she said, frowning. "But if you say so, Pete, it must be so."

"Where do you fit into all this, Jane?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, we'll see," I said. I finished the last of my drink and yawned. "We'll talk about it another time. I'm going to bed now."

"You run right in," she said, taking my glass. "Let me know when you're in bed. I'll wash the glasses while you're getting ready."

I went into the bathroom and stared blearily at myself in the mirror. The bruises were already turning yellow and green so I guessed they were getting better. I brushed my teeth and washed my face. I looked at the shower but decided against it. I went into the bedroom,

undressed and got into bed. It felt good.

"Good night," I called.

She came quickly into the bedroom and perched on the edge of the bed. She tucked the covers in around my shoulders, then she leaned over and kissed me. Her lips were soft and sweet. That was the last thing I remembered as I went to sleep.

I awakened groggily, not quite sure where I was or what day it was. I lay there for a minute, getting oriented. Slowly the memory of the night before came back to me. I remembered going to sleep in the middle of a kiss. I'd certainly never done that before. But it must have done me good. Aside from feeling so groggy, I felt much better. I glanced at the radio-clock. It was ten o'clock.

I got out of bed and staggered into the bathroom. I splashed cold water on my face and felt a little more alert. Then I shaved and had a good hot shower. I came out of it a new man.

Wrapping a towel around my middle, I headed for the kitchen. I hesitated in the living room, looking around to see if Jane had decided to spend the night. She hadn't —but somebody else had.

I walked around to the front of the couch. It was a man sprawled out, face down, on the couch. He was fully dressed except for his jacket which was thrown over the nearest chair. I went over and grabbed him by the shoulder. The idea was to turn him over so I could see who he was and to awaken him at the same time. It was only fifty per cent successful.

I recognized him all right. He was the guy I'd had the fight with in the Hapsburg Hotel the night before. But he didn't wake up for a very good reason. He was dead. Somebody had put two bullets through his chest in the general area of the heart. General, but still close enough to do the job. He looked as if he'd been dead for several hours.

I took my hand off his shoulder and went back to the bedroom and got a cigarette. I returned to the kitchen without looking at the body on the couch. I poured myself some tomato juice and downed it. It didn't do too

much for me, so I followed it with a small shot of whiskey.

My apartment was becoming too damned popular. First a naked woman, complete with marijuana cigarettes, and now a corpse. I didn't like it. But one thing was very obvious to me. I moved back into the living room and picked up the phone. I dialed the police number and asked for Lieutenant Weston when the operator answered.

"Pete Draco," I said when he answered. "Had any tips about me this morning?"

"No. Should I have?"

"It figures," I said, "but I'm glad I got in the first call. I got up this morning to find a stranger stretched out on the couch in my living room."

"As shapely as the one you had before?"

"Not quite. This one's a man. And he's dead. Somebody put two bullets through him."

"You?"

"No. I haven't touched him recently."

"Recently? What does that mean?"

"That I've seen him before—although I don't know who he is. Come over and I'll tell you all I know."

"I'll be right there," he said and hung up.

I put the receiver down and went into the bedroom. I got dressed and went back to the kitchen. I put some coffee on and had another drink while it brewed. I was just having my first cup when the bell rang. I went out to let them in.

It was Lieutenant Weston and his crew of men. They marched in and took over. The lieutenant watched as they set up a camera and started photographing the corpse.

"I'll be in the kitchen finishing my coffee," I told him. "There'll be an extra cup for you if you're interested."

He nodded and I went back to the kitchen. I finished the one cup of coffee and had started on another by the time Weston showed up. I got another cup and poured the coffee. He sat down at the table and poured some sugar into the coffee.

"Better tell me what you know about the guy, Pete," he said. "All of it."

"Not too much to it," I said. "Last night I was at the Hapsburg Hotel with a young lady who's staying there. Susan Siena. We were in the Bamboo Room where we were going to have dinner. We were dancing and about halfway through someone bumped into us. It was the guy out there and his partner, a flashy blonde. It didn't seem like an accident, but I let it go. A minute later he bumped into us again. This time he almost knocked us down. We had a few words and he rushed me. I floored him a couple of times and then it looked as if he were going to pull a gun. But the house detective came charging in then and threw us all out."

"All together?"

"Well—he told us all at the same time. Miss Siena and I left immediately, so I don't know about him."

"You mean you didn't see him again afterwards?"

"No. Not until I found him dead in there this morning."

"Ever see him before last night?" he asked.

"Not that I know of."

"What did you do after you left the hotel last night?"

"Went to the Embers for dinner and then went pub-crawling. I took Miss Siena home about midnight and then came home. I had a couple of drinks and then went right to sleep. Slept like a log until ten this morning."

"That's all?"

"That's all." I had my reasons for leaving Jane out of it.

He sipped his coffee for a moment. "You were right about one thing. I got a call just before I left to come here. The idea was I'd find something interesting if I came and looked in your apartment."

"An indignant and anonymous citizen?"

"Yeah. I tried to get a trace on the call but he hung up too quickly. You figured someone was going to call?"

"Of course I did. Why go to all the bother of planting a corpse on someone if you're going to keep it a secret?"

"But, why, Pete?" he asked. "All right, the marijuana plant was maybe meant as a warning, like you said. But this one is more serious. Especially, if what you say is true, if they made the frame all the better by arranging for you to have a fight with the victim in a public

place. Why? Have you stumbled onto something?"

"If I have, I don't know about it," I said.

"Pete, do you swear to me that you've told me everything you know about the guy in there?"

"Everything, Dick," I said.

"You know who the guy is?" he asked, and then went on to answer his own question. "Louis Fontelli, more popularly known as Rocky Fontelli. He worked, or did the last I knew, for the Crime Syndicate and more especially for a guy named Joe Donetti."

"It's beginning to feel crowded in my phone booth," I said.

"You said he started to pull a gun on you last night?"

"I think so."

"Well, he doesn't have a gun now," he said. "It's probably the first time he's been without a gun since he stopped wearing short pants. He's got a long record, that one. We knew him down here well. Even suggested a number of times that we'd prefer it if he didn't come around."

"Looks as if someone else had the same feeling about him."

"Maybe. But I'm more interested in the feelings about you that the same person has. You know, Pete, there are some people who might just believe that you killed Fontelli and should have a medal for it. And there are others who'll believe it but have a different idea about what should be done."

"Among them our District Attorney," I said.

"I wouldn't be surprised," he said. He finished his coffee and pushed the cup aside. He stared at me gloomily. "You know, by rights, I should take you in for questioning. But I figure you can accomplish more for both of us the longer you're free."

"Thanks, Dick," I said.

"Don't thank me yet," he said, holding up his hand. "I don't think I'm giving you more than a few hours and maybe not that long. As soon as the D.A. hears about it, I'm going to be in trouble and you're going to be on the carpet. And for the sake of both of us, you'd better be on tap when he does want you."

"I'll be around," I told him.

"Okay," he said. He stood up. "I probably ought to have my head examined, but that's your chance. Better make the most of it." He turned and headed for the living room. I got up and followed him.

The basket boys had already removed the body. The two detectives were just standing around waiting for him.

"Through?" he asked them.

"Yeah," one of them said. "We printed everything. Joe already took the couch cushions down to the car."

"Let's go then," Weston said. He turned to me. "We'll return your couch cushions later. I'll be in touch."

"I'll be here," I said.

The two detectives looked at me curiously, as if they also were surprised that the lieutenant wasn't taking me in. Then the three of them were gone, leaving me alone. With my memories. The only trouble was I didn't have enough memories to do me much good.

I went to the phone and dialed the number of a doctor I knew who was only a couple of blocks away. Luckily he was in and said he could see me right away.

It was only two blocks to the doctor's office so I walked. His nurse showed me into his office immediately.

"Well, what's your problem, Draco?" he asked as I came in. "Too much liquor, the wrong kind of women, or something serious?"

"None of those," I said. "Can you tell by examining me whether I was given a drug last night around midnight?"

"Maybe," he said. "Depends on the drug, as well as other factors. Sit over there."

I obeyed him and he came over and started looking into my eyes with a light. He grunted as he looked into each eye, but it could have meant anything. I discovered long ago that doctors always grunt to cover up any necessity for making an intelligent remark. Finally, he put away the light.

"I don't have to look any further," he said. "I'd guess that you were given some sort of a chloral prescription within the past twelve hours. Or, in other words, you took a couple of strong sleeping tablets."

"I didn't *take* any," I said. I stood up. "Thanks, Doctor. How much do I owe you?"

"Ask my nurse," he said. "You know how I feel about money."

"Sure—get as much of it as you can. I feel the same way myself so don't get insulted. I'll see you around."

"What happened to your face?" he asked. "It's covered with bruises."

I was getting tired of the question. "I'm just lucky, I guess," I said, and left before he could follow it up. I stopped in the front office long enough to part with five dollars and then I went back to my office.

There were several ways of looking at the case, but they all added up to the same thing: Draco had been taken for a sucker. There was a beautiful blonde dish named Jane Benedict. She worked for two guys who were part of the Crime Syndicate. She had come to see me one evening and spent the night. The next night somebody had been able to get into my apartment. Nobody else had a key so far as I knew. Then she had come to see me again the night before. She had served me two drinks and suddenly I was very sleepy. I went to sleep while she was still in the apartment. Supposedly, she left but then, once again, someone was able to get in. And leave a dead body. Again no problem with locks. And I hadn't awakened. Then an examination proved that I'd had sleeping tablets—something I'd never taken in my life. It all added up to one thing: Draco was a pushover. I didn't like it.

There was one other thing nagging at the back of my mind and I decided that I'd better look into that before I did anything else. I went upstairs and into the bedroom where my gun was still hanging in the shoulder holster on the corner of the door. I took the gun out and sniffed at the barrel. There was a smell of gunpowder. I broke the gun open. Two shells had been fired.

I went back into the living room and looked around. Two cushions were missing from the couch, but Weston had said he was taking them. There was something else missing, too, I realized. A red throw-cushion which was sometimes on the couch and sometimes on one of the

chairs. Weston hadn't said anything about taking it. I started looking.

Fifteen minutes later I found it—tucked away in the back of a closet where a more suspicious cop might have found it. There were two blackened holes in it and it still had a strong odor of gunpowder and burned cloth.

Well, at least I knew how Rocky Fontelli had been killed. He'd been brought to my apartment alive—probably drugged—and then killed with my gun, the shots being fired through a cushion of mine to deaden the sound. And all the time I'd been soundly asleep as a result of sleeping tablets given to me in a couple of drinks served by a shapely blonde.

I cursed with a certain amount of justified feeling and went back downstairs. The first thing I did was clean the gun and reload it. There was no point in asking for more trouble than I already had.

Once I'd finished that I phoned a locksmith I knew and asked him to come right over and change the locks on my apartment and office doors. He said he'd be there in five minutes.

Then I made a more important call. To the hotel where Jane Benedict had been staying. I don't think I was surprised at the answer.

"Sorry," the operator said. "Miss Benedict checked out at nine this morning."

"Any forwarding address?" I asked. I'm an optimist.

"No, sir," the operator said.

I said thank you automatically and hung up. This was really my day. I thought about it a minute, then looked up the number of Dolly Parrish. It took a little time and a lot of argument to get her on the phone—I guess it was a little early in the day for madams—but finally she was there, her voice heavy with sleep.

"I want a girl," I said.

"At this hour of the day?" she exclaimed. "Well, after all these years, I shouldn't be surprised at anything."

"I don't want her for the reasons you think," I said. "And I don't want just any girl. I want Pepper Barr. Where can I find her?"

"I don't know, Pete."

"What does that mean?"

"She quit working for me last night. She agreed to go on a date and then never showed up for it. When the man called me back, I called her and she said she was quitting and that she was leaving town today."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"No, and I was too angry to ask her."

"Can you give me her address and phone number?"

"Just a minute," she said. She was gone for a couple of minutes, then came back and read an address and number to me. I thanked her and broke the connection. Then I dialed Pepper Barr's number. There was no answer.

The door opened and my locksmith came in.

"I've just been looking at the lock upstairs," he said, "and I don't think you need a new lock, but if you want one I'll put it in."

"Why don't I need a new one?" I asked.

"Somebody been getting into your apartment?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, somebody took the lock apart up there and adjusted the tumblers so that it could be opened by any key for the same make of lock. That means that right here in the city there are about two hundred thousand skeleton keys for your door."

"So why don't I need a new lock?"

"If you know how, you can do that with any lock. I can readjust the tumblers so only your key will work again. That'll be just as good as a new lock."

"What the hell good is a lock," I said irritably, "if anybody can take it apart and fix it so any key will open it?"

"Not just anybody," he said. "It has to be someone who knows what to do and how to do it." He grinned. "You'd better be more careful who you let fool around your place."

He had a point. And it was another mark against Jane Benedict. When she had stayed all night, I'd left her upstairs when I went to work. That must have been when she either fixed the lock herself or let someone else in to do it.

"Okay," I said. "Fix the lock so only my key will open it. Better check the one down here, too."

"Will do," he said cheerfully and left.

I buckled on my holster and gun, shrugged into my coat and was ready to leave. The phone rang. I hesitated, debating whether to answer it or not, but then decided it might be Weston with information I needed. I picked up the receiver and said hello.

It was Weston. "Pete," he said grimly, "things aren't looking so good."

"What does that mean?"

"We've examined the two bullets taken from Fontelli. They were fired from your gun. The .38."

"What?" I said, trying to sound surprised. "That's impossible."

"Maybe," he said, "but we've made plenty of tests on your guns and there's no question but what these bullets were fired from your .38. I guess I should have brought you and the gun in with me."

"You mean you think I did it?" I demanded.

"Personally, I don't think you killed the man," he said, "but that doesn't mean a damn thing. I'm a cop and I'm supposed to go by the evidence, not by what I think. I've just had a long lecture on that."

"The D.A.?"

"Yeah. The same anonymous phone caller gave him a ring this morning. At the moment, there is some question whether I will be suspended or not. And he's yelling for your hide."

"It figures," I muttered.

"He wants you in his office immediately. Under the circumstances, I expect he intends to charge you. I'm sorry, Pete, that I couldn't give you more time."

"That's all right," I said, thinking furiously.

"So you'd better get right down here," he said. "If you don't, I'll have to come after you."

I made a decision. "Tell the D.A. I'll be there as quickly as I can."

"All right, Pete. Don't goof it." He hung up.

I put the receiver down and went outside. I stepped around the side of the building and told the locksmith I

was leaving and to be sure everything was locked up when he left. I got into the Cadillac and headed downtown. But I turned off on Dade Boulevard and cut over to the Venetian Causeway.

Pepper Barr's address was on one of the islands which the Causeway crossed. It turned out to be a modern apartment building. I stopped in the lobby and punched the bell under her name. There was no answer. I leaned on the button. Nothing happened.

The super lived in an apartment on the ground floor. I went around to it and knocked. After a minute the door opened and an old man stood there.

"No vacancies," he said and started to close the door.

"Hold it, Pop," I said. I put one foot in the door to make sure that he did hold it. "I'm not looking for an apartment. I'm looking for a girl."

"We got a lot of girls living here," he said. He looked at me curiously. "You a cop?"

"Private," I told him. I showed him my license. Then I took out a ten-dollar bill and showed him the picture on that. "You have a Pepper Barr living here?"

"Yeah," he said, bobbing his head. He licked his lips and I couldn't tell whether it was because of the ten dollars or the mention of Pepper's name. "Pretty as a picture, that girl. Don't blame you for looking for her. If I was twenty years younger, I'd be looking for her myself."

"She doesn't answer her phone," I told him, "and there was no answer when I just rang her bell. She may have had an accident, or something of the sort, and I thought maybe you and me could check on it."

He hesitated, eying the bill. So I handed it over. He put it in his pocket and gave me a toothless grin.

"Ain't no use checking on her," he said. "She left about an hour ago."

"Alone?"

"Yeah."

"How did she go?"

"Called a taxi," he said. "I carried her bags down to it myself."

"Do you know where she told the driver to take her?"

"Yeah," he said. He gave me a shrewd glance. "Gave

me five dollars for just carrying her bags to the taxi, she did."

I took the hint. I dug out a five-dollar bill and held it out. It vanished into the same pocket with the ten.

"She was going to the airport," he said.

"Did she say where she was going when she got there?" I asked, wondering what that would cost me.

He must have thought about that, too, for he shook his head sadly. "Didn't say. Just told me she might be back in a couple of weeks or that she might not be back at all. Rent's paid up for another month though."

"Furnished apartment?" I guessed.

He nodded. My guess was that Pepper wouldn't be coming back.

"Okay, Pop," I said. "Thanks. Maybe I'll be seeing you around."

"Any time, son," he said, patting the pocket where he'd put my fifteen dollars. He gave me another toothless grin and closed the door. I went out to my car, headed towards Miami and gunned it. Now it was only a question of whether I could get to the airport before a plane left for somewhere with Pepper Barr aboard.

CHAPTER 9

ONCE ACROSS the Causeway, I headed for the Miami International Airport, driving as fast as I dared. I made it in slightly less than a half hour. I pulled into the parking lot, parked the car and hurried into the terminal. I began at one end and started working down. I was about halfway through the terminal when I spotted her. She was sitting over against the wall, a newspaper held up in front of her face. She wore a scarf over her red hair, but there was enough of it peeping out to attract my attention. I moved over to one side where I could see the face back of the paper. It was Pepper Barr. I went over and sat next to her.

"Hello, Pepper," I said.

She looked at me and there was fear on her face. "You're making a mistake," she said. "That's not my name."

"That's the name you gave me," I said. "The last time I saw you was in my apartment. You were wearing a lot less clothes but I'd still recognize you anywhere. You must remember me—good old Peter Draco, everybody's sucker."

"What—what do you want?" she asked.

"Just a little friendly talk," I told her. "That's all."

"I can't. I have to catch a plane."

A call came over the loudspeaker. "Eastern Airlines Flight 107, the Golden Falcon to New York, now loading at Gate Twelve."

"That's my flight," she said desperately. She started to rise, but I put my hand on her arm.

"You can always take the next one in an hour or two."

"But—but my luggage is on board. . . ."

"They'll hold it in New York for you."

"I must," she said again. She sounded close to tears.

"Anyone here watching you?"

"I—don't think so," she said.

"Okay, honey, you have two choices," I said. "You can talk to me and then get on the next plane for New York. If you don't like that, then you can stay and talk to the Miami Beach police, but I doubt if they'll let you take the plane when they're through. Take your pick."

"All right," she said resignedly. "I'll talk to you. But you will let me go then, won't you?"

"I promise it," I said. "Now, let's go over and change your reservation."

She went meekly along with me to the Eastern Airlines counter. I did all the talking and after some minor haggling, and a lot of frowning from the clerk, I had her changed to the next flight. Her luggage would be waiting in New York for her. With a persecuted expression, the clerk went through the necessary paper work and handed back her ticket. I took her by the arm and guided her to the nearest cocktail lounge. I chose a table in the darkest corner where I could also watch everyone who came in. When the waiter came over, I ordered a martini for myself and a double shot of whiskey for her. I waited until he brought the drinks and left.

"Wrap yourself around that," I said, pushing the double shot towards her. "It'll make you feel better."

There was no doubt that she was a very frightened woman. She picked up the drink, her hand shaking, and downed half of it. She waited a minute, then finished it. A little color began to creep into her face.

"They'll kill me," she said.

"Nobody will kill you, honey," I said. "Nobody will know that you told me anything. And the whole thing will soon be over—one way or the other—and you'll be safe in New York."

She made one last try. "I don't know anything to tell you," she said.

"Sure, you do," I told her. "Somebody sent you to me the other night as a gift, but they also sent another gift

which you carried and left in my apartment. The marijuana cigarettes you tucked under the cushion of my couch."

She didn't say anything.

"How long have you been on pot?" I asked her.

"Four or five years," she said faintly. "But it's not a habit. I can give it up any time. It's not like—other things."

"That's what everybody says," I told her, "and it may be true—but I never knew anybody who did give it up unless it was to take up something stronger. Taking a supply to New York with you?"

"No," she said, but she sounded as if she were lying.

"Play square with me," I said, "and I don't care what you take with you. But try to fill me up with a lot of lies and I'll find out in time to phone New York and suggest that they look into your luggage."

"But I don't really know anything to tell you," she protested.

"I think you know enough to be helpful. Start telling me about it."

"I told you the other night," she said. "I didn't even get the call making the date with you. Whoever it was called Dolly and arranged for me to go. She told me that she didn't know who the man was and that the money was sent by a messenger. I didn't have a chance to know who it was."

"That brings us to the second present," I said. "Did Dolly Parrish also take the order for you to bring the marijuana cigarettes and plant them in my apartment?"

She hesitated a moment. "No," she said faintly.

"Who did tell you to do that?"

"A girl."

"Who?"

"She didn't tell me her name. She was a tall blonde, rather pretty."

It sounded as if Jane Benedict had been a busy little girl since I'd known her.

"What happened?"

"Right after Dolly called me, I got this call from a girl. She knew all about the date I was supposed to go on and

said she wanted to talk to me about it. She said she could be at my apartment within fifteen minutes and I was to wait for her."

"How come you did?"

"I wasn't going to, but she said if I didn't that her friends would see that I was framed on a narcotics charge. She made it sound real enough to frighten me."

"Did she say who her friends were?"

"No. But what kind of a chance would I have on a frame like that? You know they'd throw the book at me."

"Probably. Go on."

"Well, she came over. Looking as pretty and innocent as could be, but believe me she was tougher than any of the girls who work for Dolly. She said she and her friends wanted me to take a dozen cigarettes to your apartment and hide them in some easy spot before you arrived. And I was to smoke up a storm so the place would smell of tea. She said the police would come and they wanted me to be there when they did. I was to tell the police that you had given me the cigarettes I'd smoked. If I didn't do it, then they would frame me."

"And if you did do it?"

"I'd get all the high-grade pot I wanted. They'd also give me five hundred dollars and take care of the trouble with the cops."

"So you agreed."

"What else could I do?" she demanded bitterly. "Girls like me don't have a chance to buck those kind of people."

"How did you know what kind of people they were?"

"I knew by the way the girl talked. I've met them before, all over the country. You don't work in this racket long without meeting them and you soon get to recognize them."

"What happened when it fell through because I kicked you out?"

"The girl called and told me to keep my mouth shut."

"That's all?"

"That was all until last night. The same girl called me again."

"What time?"

"One or one-thirty in the morning. She said she was coming over to see me. I told her I had to go out on a date, but she said to forget it and they'd pay me for it. She said they were trying to keep me from getting into trouble. So I stayed at home and she came over. She told me that something was going to happen that might make the cops start looking for me and that I had to get out of town today. She gave me another five hundred dollars and the name and phone number of a woman in New York through whom I could get work."

"What if you didn't want to go?"

"She reminded me that they could still frame me, but she didn't have to do that. I wanted to get out. I didn't know what she was talking about, but I didn't want to have anything to do with cops. I still don't."

"No reason why you have to because of this," I said. "What else happened?"

"Nothing. The girl left and this morning I made a reservation. That's all."

"You're sure you haven't left anything out?"

"I've told you all I know. Are you still going to let me go to New York?"

"Sure," I said. "I'm also going to stay with you until you leave so that I can be sure that nothing happens to you."

I called the waiter and ordered two more drinks. We sat, drinking them leisurely. She had nothing more to tell me and I wasn't even successful in getting her to talk about anything else. She was still frightened although the drinks were helping her. When it was time for her flight, I walked her to the gate and watched her board the plane.

I went back outside and got my car and headed back towards the Beach. I had driven about fifteen blocks when I became aware that somebody was following me. It was a black car staying very carefully two cars behind me. I made a few tests to be sure and then approached the next traffic light carefully. I timed it so that I barely squeezed through on the light change, leaving the other cars behind. Then I speeded up and as soon as I could, I turned off, did some more zigzagging and then cut down

to Seventh Street and took that to Miami.

Enough time had elapsed so that I had an idea the Beach police might already be looking for me. And Driscoll, or someone else, was also interested in me. Under the circumstances, I began to feel that my white Cadillac was slightly conspicuous. When I reached the center of Miami, I drove into a Cadillac garage and ordered some work done on my car. It was all minor but enough to take two or three days. And I left, driving one of their black sedans.

I drove back across the Venetian Causeway and headed for the hotel where Jane Benedict had been staying until that morning. I went in and hunted up the bell captain.

"I'm never happy," I told him, "unless I give away a little money every day. Do you suppose I could find one or two people around here who would be interested? Starting with you, let us say."

"That would depend, sir," he said, but the expression on his face indicated that anything short of murder would be acceptable. "What did you wish?"

"I wish," I said solemnly, "to find a girl. She checked out of here this morning. There was some mix-up and I was supposed to meet her but didn't. I guess she did a slow burn about it for she left no forwarding address. You think you might be able to find the boy who carried her luggage and arrange for me to talk to him?"

"It might be possible," he said. He wasn't going to commit himself until he found out how much I liked to give money away. "Do you know the young lady's name, sir?"

"Of course. Miss Jane Benedict. She checked out about nine o'clock. She was a blonde dish." Then, as if I'd just suddenly remembered, I dug into my pocket and pulled out ten dollars. "Maybe this will cover the cost of any shoe leather you wear out looking for the boy."

He took the ten dollars and pocketed it. He didn't seem to even look at it, but I would've bet that he not only knew the denomination but could have reeled off the serial number. As soon as the money was in his pocket, he looked much more hopeful of success.

"You wait here, sir," he said. "I'll see if I can find the boy."

"You do that," I told him.

I waited and after a few minutes another bellboy came up to me.

"Did you want to see me, sir?" he asked.

"That depends," I said. "Are you the boy who carried Miss Benedict's luggage when she checked out this morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I want to see you. How's your memory about the details?"

"My memory is usually pretty good, sir," he said. He put just a slight emphasis on the "usually" but it was enough so that I knew the captain had told him something about the financial picture. I reached and got another ten dollars and held it out.

"How is it in this particular case?" I asked.

"Very good, sir," he said with a grin. He took the money and tucked it away. "What did you want to know?"

"How did she leave?"

"In a cab, sir. I called it for her myself."

"Did you happen to hear where she told the driver to take her?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, sir, I didn't," he said. He studied my face and must have decided that I had paid for more than I'd got. "But I know the cab driver she went with. Will that help, sir?"

"Will it," I said. "Who is he?"

"Charley Hudson. He works off the cab stand near the side entrance to the hotel."

"Think he'd be there now?"

"If he's not out on a call."

"Thanks," I said. "The next time I want to spend money wisely, I'll know where to come." I left him and went through the lobby and out the front door. I turned to the left and walked down a slight incline to where three cabs were parked on the side street. The three drivers were standing beside the lead cab. I walked up to them.

"Charley Hudson?" I asked.

"That's me," one of them said. He was a little thin man with a completely bald head.

"Let's go," I said. "Which is your cab?"

"The next one," he said, "but George here is first in line."

"Sorry, I want your cab. You can take care of George out of your tip, if you want to. That's your business."

The two drivers glanced at each other and the second one nodded his head ever so slightly. The little bald man walked back to his cab and opened the door. I climbed in. He shut the door and went around to slide behind the wheel.

"Where to, sir?" he asked.

"Drive me around the block and back to here," I told him.

He gave me a curious glance in the rearview mirror, but didn't say anything. He started the motor and the cab pulled away from the curb.

"I like riding around the block," I told him, "and when I have a happy ride, I tip heavier than other people do for a twenty-mile ride. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," he said, but it was obvious that he didn't.

"About nine o'clock this morning," I said, "you picked up a blonde girl here at the hotel. With luggage. One of the bellboys came and got you. I want to know where you took the girl."

"Cop?"

"No. Call it a romantic interest."

"A pretty girl?" he asked next.

"A dish."

"Okay, I remember. She had me drive her to the International Airport."

"Know what plane she was taking?"

"She didn't say." He scratched his bald head while he eyed me in the mirror. "Funny thing, I don't think she took a plane."

"What makes you think that?"

"Well, a friend of mine, Will Fergusen, is a hackie. He was on the line at the airport when I drove up with this girl. We said hello to each other and I let the girl out. Then I went around the circle and came back to get in

the line. Will was gone. But later I saw him back here in the Beach and he said the girl just went into the terminal, then came right back out and got in his cab. Funny, huh?"

"Very," I agreed. This sounded more like it. I didn't think that Jane would be taking a powder; she seemed too much a part of whatever was going on. "Did your friend say where he took her?"

He shook his head. "I didn't ask him. We was just talking about how screwy some passengers are."

"Such as ones who like to ride around the block?" I asked. We were already back at the hotel and he was pulling into the line behind the other two cabs. "Where can I find your friend?"

"He usually works off the stand up at the Hapsburg Hotel. Know where it is?"

"Yes," I said as he came to a stop. The meter read fifty cents. I took out ten dollars and fifty cents. "Think that'll take care of you and the driver who got cheated out of a trip?"

"Certainly will," he said. "Thank you, sir."

"Think nothing of it," I said. "I do it all the time." I got out of the cab and got my car and drove up Collins Avenue.

As I reached 27th Street, I drove slowly and kept a careful watch. Sure enough, there was an unmarked police car parked across the street from my office. I was glad I had a black car instead of my usual white one. I speeded up and was soon past them.

When I reached the Hapsburg, I pulled into a side street and parked. I got out and walked over to the hack stand. There was one taxi there, the driver sitting behind the wheel. I walked up to him.

"Will Fergusen?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Will's out with a fare."

"Think he'll be back soon?"

"Should be. It was a short fare. But he might pick up somebody before he gets back here."

"Okay," I said. "I'll wait." I went back to my car and sat down.

About ten minutes later another cab pulled into the

stand. The driver, a heavy-set man, got out and walked up to the other cab. I saw the two drivers exchange some words and the second driver looked in my direction. Then he started to walk slowly across the street. I sat still and let him come.

He walked up to the car and looked at me curiously. "You looking for me?" he asked.

"I don't know. I'm looking for Will Fergusen."

"I'm Will. I don't know you, do I?"

"Not yet," I said. "A friend of yours, Charley Hudson, told me where to find you."

"I know Charley," he admitted. "What can I do for you?"

"This morning you picked up a blonde girl at International Airport. She'd been in Charley's cab. I want to know where you took her."

"Why?" he asked.

"Personal reasons. I'm not a cop, if that's what's worrying you."

"I don't know," he said. "We ain't supposed to give out information like that. It's against regulations."

I sighed and reached into my pocket for another ten-dollar bill. I was certainly getting careless with those pictures of Alexander Hamilton. I stroked it lovingly and held it so he could see it clearly.

"Think this might help the regulations bit?" I asked.

"I guess it might at that," he said. "It's been a slow day."

"It's been a fast one for me," I said, "so don't just give me the name of another friend who can maybe tell me what I want to know. I'm going to have to start printing them myself if I keep giving these things out." I handed him the bill.

"It was a funny thing," he said. "I noticed this broad when Charley drove up with her because she looked like pure mink all the way down, if you know what I mean. She gets out of Charley's cab, gives her luggage to a porter and goes into the terminal. Charley pulls out and right away she and the porter come out of the terminal again. The porter is looking as if he's confused, too. She gets into my cab, the porter puts her bag in, she tips

him and we're off for Miami Beach. Screwy, huh?"

"In anybody's book," I agreed. "Where'd you take her?"

"The Cannes Hotel, just above Forty-sixth Street."

"Did she have a reservation there?"

"I don't know. But she went in and stayed as far as I know. A good-looking broad."

"That she is," I said. "Well, thanks, Will."

"It was a pleasure," he said with a grin.

I started my car and made a U-turn in the street, then a right on Collins and kept going. It was only a few blocks to the Cannes. I found a parking place a half-block away and walked over to it. I went inside and found the house phones. I picked up the receiver.

"Miss Jane Benedict," I said when the operator answered.

I could hear the phone ringing and then a moment later the reeceiver was picked up.

"Hello," she said. There was no mistaking that voice.

"Joe there?" I asked thickly.

"Joe?" she said. "There's no Joe here. Who did you want?"

"Sorry, wrong number," I muttered and hung up.

I'd found out what I wanted to know. She was still in the hotel. I left the hotel and went back to my car. From where it was parked, I had a good view of both the front and side entrances to the hotel. I lit a cigarette and settled back to wait.

Three-quarters of an hour later she came out of the hotel, looking like a fashion model on her way to work. The doorman blew his whistle and one of the cabs came shooting up the ramp. She got in, the cab coasted down the ramp, turned on Collins and went south past me. I started the car and fell in behind it.

We went straight down Collins Avenue, past all of the fancy hotels, then past Lummus Park. I began to think she was going across the MacArthur Causeway, but then the cab turned right on Fifth Street. After about two blocks it began to slow down. There were no other cars on the street, so I passed the cab and watched through the rearview mirror. Sure enough it soon

stopped. I went ahead and turned right on the next street. As soon as I was around the corner I pulled to the curb and stopped. I got out and went back to the corner.

I was just in time to see Jane get out of the cab and go into a small private house. The cab continued to stay at the curb so I guessed she was having it wait. I lit a cigarette and loitered on the corner, trying to look like a neighbor who was just avoiding mowing the lawn. A patrol car drifted by, the two cops looking at me curiously, but it didn't stop and soon faded out of sight up Fifth Street.

She was in the house about half an hour, then came out and got back into the cab. It pulled away from the curb and I turned and walked towards my car. I decided that I was more curious about the house she had visited than where she was going next. I stood with my back to Fifth Street until I heard the cab go by. Then I returned and walked down the street towards the house.

It was a small, attractive little house, its lawn well kept and ringed with flowers. There was a huge aerial on top of the house, the sort usually used for a short-wave radio set-up. That gave me an idea. I went straight up to the house and knocked on the door.

In a few minutes the door opened and a man looked out. He was middle-aged, a pleasant-looking man wearing a sport shirt and a pair of shorts.

"Yes?" he asked.

"I hope you won't think me rude," I said. "But my name's Gilson. Fred Gilson. I live down the street and I've noticed your aerial. It's for a short-wave set, isn't it?"

"Yes," he said.

"I wonder if I could come in and talk to you a minute about it, if it's not too much trouble."

He glaced at his watch. "I guess I could spare a few minutes, but not much more than that. Come in."

He opened the door and I stepped into the small, comfortably furnished living room. There was a drink beside a chair and a sheaf of papers, as though he'd been doing some work.

"I hope I'm not intruding," I said.

"No," he said, "but I do have an important call coming through in a few minutes and then I'll have to ask you to excuse me. What did you say your name was?"

"Fred Gilson."

"I'm Jerry Morris," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"It's about the short-wave radio. I don't know a thing about it but for some time I've been thinking about taking it up as a hobby. Could—could I see your set?"

He hesitated a moment, then shrugged. "I don't see why not," he said. "You say you don't know anything about short-wave?"

"Not a blessed thing. But it sounds interesting."

He crossed the room and threw open a door. It opened into a room that once must have been a study, but now was filled with equipment. It was true that I knew nothing about short-wave radio, but I knew there was more than a set there. Along one wall was what I took to be the set; I could see the loudspeaker up towards the top and the microphone that was in front of the chair. Then around the room there was a lot of other equipment, including four tape recorders, all of which seemed to be hooked up to the set.

"My goodness," I exclaimed. "There's a lot more to it than I expected. Would one like this be expensive?"

He smiled. "One just like this would be quite expensive. But you can start with something much smaller."

"That's good," I said. "What I was wondering—when I'm ready to get mine, would you maybe give me some advice? Like I said, I don't know anything about it."

"I guess I could," he said, "if you manage to catch me sometime when I'm not busy. Early mornings would be best."

"Gee, that's swell," I said. "I'll certainly take you up on it."

A red light went on on the panel and he looked at his watch. "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave now," he said briskly. "But drop around some morning." He was already ushering me towards the door.

"I'll do that," I said, letting myself be pushed through

the outer door, too. "Thanks, Mr.—" But he closed the door on my thanks.

I wanted to hang around and see if I could hear anything, but I decided it wasn't the smart thing to do, so I walked up the street, rounded the corner and got into my car.

I sat there for a few minutes, trying to make something out of what I'd seen. Jane Benedict had led me to a house where Jerry Morris was living. Jerry Morris was the third partner with Urbino and Novelle and, therefore, supposedly a part of the Syndicate. But instead of vacationing in a hotel with his partners, he was living in a house with a short-wave radio set and a lot of electronic equipment. Aside from the rather loose relationship of the Syndicate, I didn't know if there were any connection between Phil Driscoll and Urbino and Novelle, but I had a hunch that whatever Jerry Morris was doing was what Driscoll didn't want me to stumble across.

I started the motor and drove thoughtfully uptown. The cops were still across the street from my office, so I kept on driving until I reached the Hapsburg Hotel. This time, however, I parked on the side street and went into the basement-level entrance of the hotel. I found a house phone and asked for the lobby bar. One of the bartenders answered.

"Buck?" I asked.

"Just a minute," he said.

Then another voice came on. "Buck speaking," he said.

"Pete Draco, Buck," I said. "Has anybody been around looking for me?"

"Like who?"

"Like the cops?"

"No fuzz around that I know of," he said. "What's up?"

"I will be in about one minute," I said. I hung up and headed for the stairs. I made it in less than a minute.

"Where were you?" Buck asked as I perched on a stool.

"Downstairs," I said. "I came in the side entrance

and checked to see if any cops were around. Lieutenant Weston knows that I come here and they'll probably be around sooner or later. . . . Make me a martini."

He started mixing it. "What's the beef?"

"You ever hear of a hood named Rocky Fontelli?"

"Sure. You tangled with him in the Bamboo Room last night. I heard about it."

"Yeah, I tangled with him. And this morning he turned up in my apartment—slightly dead."

He whistled softly. "One thing I got to say for you, when you look for trouble you look for the biggest. You put the freeze on him—like in self-defense?"

"No. I was out, like last summer's hemline. Somebody else killed him and put him there. With two bullets in him from my gun. The D.A. wants to have a little brotherly talk with me, but I'm a few hours too late for the meeting. They've got my office staked out."

He put the martini in front of me. "Enjoy it on the house. I don't think they serve those in the pokey."

"I've heard," I said. "Buck, I've got an idea rattling around in my head, but it's no more than a chick. Maybe you can help."

"Me?" he said in surprise. "Look, I've got a family. Besides, I don't know how to do anything except mix drinks and shoot off my lip."

"That's the point," I said. "Remember one night I was in here and you told me about a rumor that somebody was trying to take over the bookies and the wire services in this area?"

He nodded.

"What's new on it?"

"I hear it's already started," he said. "Somebody told me that the local bookies went for almost a million dollars last week. That's a lot of sugar."

"Any idea who's doing it?"

He shook his head. "I've heard a lot of guesses, but that's all they are. It would have to be somebody big."

"Anybody guess Driscoll?"

"I've heard his name mentioned. But softly."

"Tell me something, Buck," I said. "I don't know much about how these things work, but I had some idea that

the Syndicate sort of supervised these things. How can one guy buck them?"

He polished the bar for a minute, looking around the room. I was the only customer. "The way I hear it," he said finally, "is that one guy, say, owns the wire services and bookies. He may not even own them all over the country. Another guy might have them in Chicago. This guy, say, does a lot of things for the Syndicate, but these things are his own. The Syndicate more or less agrees to this—that is, they give him permission to protect his own property, but they don't really protect him. If another guy tries to move in and fails, the Syndicate okays it for him to be done away with. But if the guy tries to move in and succeeds, they'll okay that, too. They only step in when the beef starts interfering with overall operation."

"I get the general picture," I said. "Care to put any names to the pieces?"

"The story is that a guy named Joe Donetti owns the wire services and bookies down here," he said. "I wouldn't know, but that's what I hear. Like I said, it's anybody's guess as to who is trying to move in, but it looks like somebody is. The bookies are taking it on the chin. And that guy you had the hassle with—the story is that he works for Joe Donetti as a troubleshooter and so maybe that's why he was down here."

"But why did he jump on me then?" I asked.

Buck shrugged. "Maybe he thinks you're the one who's trying to move in."

"You're kidding," I said. "Every time I had anything to do with a bookie, I was the one who was taken. You said the local bookies have been taken for almost a million dollars. I thought such things were impossible. How do they work it?"

"I don't know," he said. "I suppose if you had enough ways to fix enough races, it could be done that way."

"Doesn't make sense to me," I objected. "Even if you did, it would mean bribing or blackmailing too many people. If somebody did that, it would be easy for a guy like this Joe Donetti to get at least one person to talk and then he could put his finger on the guy doing it."

"I guess so," Buck said. "I guess maybe there are a lot of boat races. Maybe if you just knew about them in advance it would be enough to break the bookies."

"No," I said. "Damn it, it wouldn't work, Buck. Look how many horse owners and trainers and jockeys are down here every season. Most of them are above fixing a race, but let's guess that some people will fix them. And let's agree that others will enter a horse and think he's not ready to go for the big money so that horse won't be really trying. He's going for the exercise. But to cash in on any of that you'd have to get all of those people to talk to you and tell you what they're thinking. It just wouldn't work."

"Makes sense," Buck agreed. "Maybe they use a mind reader."

"Maybe they do," I said solemnly. I finished my drink. "Thanks, Buck. I think I'm going out to look for a mind reader."

"Hey," he said, "I thought you were working on that jewelry case?"

"I was—but everybody seems to be trying to push me around. I think it's related to something else. I've got to comb them out of my hair before I can get to work. I'll see you around."

"I hope so," Buck said fervently.

I went back down the stairs and out the side entrance. I got in my car and turned around. As I stopped for the Collins Avenue light, a black car went by and turned into the Hapsburg ramp. There were two men in the front seat. One of them was Lieutenant Weston.

I turned down Collins and drove as fast as the limit allowed. There was one place I could get some information that might put all the pieces together. There was a man I knew—a rather grand old man. He was now in his seventies and still alert and active. Once he had been one of the most successful criminals in the country. He had more or less retired almost twenty years earlier. He always claimed it was because he didn't like the Syndicate version and he wasn't going to have anyone telling him what to do. He ran a TV and radio store and repair service in Miami and did well. It was also whispered

that he still dealt in some illegal activities, but if it were true, nobody had ever proved it. I had met him several years earlier and we'd been good friends ever since.

I parked in front of his shop in Miami. It was a big rambling store, with an apartment above it where he lived. The front of the shop carried no sign except his name. ELLIOTT NEALIS, it said in big letters. I went into the store. His young clerk came briskly forward until he got close enough to recognize me. Then he slowed down and grinned.

"The old man home?" I asked.

"He's upstairs," he said. "You know the way."

I nodded and went through the store to the rear stairway. I went up the stairs and knocked at the door at the top.

"Come in, sir," a heavy voice boomed from the other side of the door.

I turned the knob and stepped inside. The apartment was always a surprise to me even though I had been there several times. The store was located in a normal business section of Miami, but the apartment was something out of a story. It was furnished with things from all over the world, yet somehow they all seemed to belong together and to create the idea of the utmost in elegance.

Elliott Nealis was sitting in a huge comfortable chair, holding a snifter of brandy in one hand and a small ebony statue in the other. A cigarette in a long holder was smoldering in an ashtray beside him. It was an impressive sight, for Elliott Nealis was a good six feet four inches tall and weighed close to three hundred pounds. He had a great shock of white hair and his face was still a cherubic pink and white. He always looked to me like an old-time church deacon who had been treated to too many chicken dinners at the homes of parishioners.

"Peter, my boy, how delightful that you thought of coming to visit an old man," he exclaimed.

"Oh," I said, "you're still pulling that pathetic old man bit. Come off it. I know you."

"My dear boy," he said, "I am seventy-three years old and man's allotted span is but three score and ten.

Would you care to join me in a brandy?"

"I'd love to," I said.

He waved his hand. "Help yourself. You know where it's kept and you're too young to expect an old man to wait on you."

"Old man," I snorted. I went over and helped myself to some of his brandy and came back to sit in the chair next to him.

"The man who partakes of a little brandy each day," he said, "has fortified himself against the vicissitudes of life. Remember that, Peter, and you may live to a ripe, mature age."

"I hope so," I said. "How are things with you?"

"I cannot complain, Peter. The store continues to do a little business, thanks to a host of idiots who insist on watching the things they call entertainment. That, plus the fact that I was fortunate enough to put away a few dollars against the onslaught of old age, saves me from the usual fate of the aged."

I glanced at him over the edge of the brandy snifter. "You know, I've heard this routine before. The truth of the matter is that you are an unregenerate old sinner who never put away anything you didn't steal and who would probably be broke right now if you didn't keep on stealing."

He chuckled. "Peter, you appreciate me." He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. "What's your trouble today?"

"Who said I was in trouble?" I demanded.

"I did. You may well know when I'm being a fraud, but I also know when you're being one. When you come here in the middle of the afternoon and work so hard at appearing casual, it means something is up. Are the police finally on your tail?"

"As a matter of fact, they are," I said. We grinned at each other. "But that's not the reason I came."

He sipped his brandy and waited.

"Do you still keep up on the modern aspects of your old pursuits?" I asked.

"Oh, I read a few things now and then," he said solemnly. "I can't say that I know more than that. A

man's interests narrow as he grows old."

"Sure," I said. "I want to know how something works."

"What?"

"Let's suppose that you are still active in certain pursuits that are considered illegal," I said. "Let us suppose that one of your comrades-in-crime controls all the bookmaking and horse wire services in an area—let's say—such as Miami. A very profitable venture. You decide that you'd like to take it away from him. The best way, you think, is to hit him through the bookies. Make him lose enough money and you'll get the business. How would you do this?"

"A very interesting problem," he said. "Very interesting. I take it that you've already run through the things that one wouldn't do?"

"Yes," I said. "At least, I think I have. Bribery or blackmail or threats are out. You'd have to control too many people and even if you could manage it, one of them might easily talk to the man you're trying to get rid of."

He nodded. "Most interesting," he said again. "I take it that I would want to conceal my identity as long as possible?"

"Yes."

"But I would also be in a position to have a considerable supply of men and money at my disposal?"

"Yes," I said. "Let us suppose you are a man of equal success with the man you want to replace. You are already operating in the area mentioned, possibly in charge of narcotics operations."

He looked at me, his eyes gay and sparkling. "You have a very vivid imagination," he said. "At the risk of spoiling what seems to be a good story, let me tell you that I too have heard rumors that something like this is going on in Miami. I was intrigued when I first heard about it and I think perhaps I've already worked out the most efficient way it could be managed."

"How?"

"We live in a marvelous age," he said. "We can send vehicles across the world and even up to circle around the sun without anyone in them and these vehicles can

send back all sorts of messages to us. Did you ever think about these marvels?"

"Sure," I said.

"But not the way some of us think about them," he said. "Even radio, which might at first glance seem to be old-fashioned, plays a part in these things. But where were we? Oh, yes. The first thing I would do would be to hire a man who is an expert on such things as radio and electronics." He glanced at me and smiled. "Ah! I see you like this line of thinking."

"Yes," I admitted.

"Somewhere in this area," he said, "I would establish a short-wave radio receiving and sending station, one capable of taking and sending several messages at once, or of picking up a wave, giving it more strength and sending it somewhere else."

"That's what I was thinking," I said.

"Ah," he said, holding up his hand, "but what are you going to send and receive? Much more is involved. Let us suppose you could be privy to all the private conversations between owners, trainers and jockeys of all the horses being raced here at any time. Don't you think this might give you a big advantage about the winning of races?"

"Yes."

"So as a start, I think I would have my specialist put a tap on the telephones of every one of the people in this category. I don't believe this would be difficult for a specialist."

"I'm sure it wouldn't," I said.

"But I wouldn't stop there," he said. "I am told that they make wonderful little gadgets these days which are slightly smaller than a cigarette package yet are complete pickup and broadcasting units. It can be placed in a room and then someone nearby can pick up everything said on a radio. I think I'd put one of these in the jockeys' room at the track. There might be a few other spots that would be worth such attention."

"You mean you think all the races are fixed and this would be the way to find out?"

"No, my boy, I don't think anything of the kind. But

I do know you'd find out enough information to give you quite an edge in making a bet. Then I also wonder if you couldn't work a variation of a very old game that cost bookies a lot of money in my time."

"What's that?"

"Let us suppose you had a man at the track with a small portable broadcasting unit. It wouldn't have to carry very far—just to wherever you had your big set. Then you might have a number of men at all the horse rooms making bets. Each of them might have small receiving sets, with ear plugs so that it would merely look like they were hard of hearing. All horse rooms have radios broadcasting the news of each race, but if you had the proper equipment you could jam the broadcast on two or three races, which would be enough. Then you could have other men, also equipped with tiny radios, who approach other bookies who will take their bets by the clock. That is, they will take a bet after a race is started but not when it's over. Now your man at the track broadcasts in the last minute or so of the race who the winner is apparently going to be. It is picked up by your station and rebroadcast on the wave length of the sets carried by your other men and they make their bets at the last moment. I think that might still work."

I nodded, thinking that he'd probably hit it right on the head. That would explain Jerry Morris and all the equipment in the house on Fifth Street. And if Morris and Urbino and Novelle were tied in with Phil Driscoll, it would also explain why everyone was so nervous about me.

"Thanks," I said. I finished my brandy and stood up. "I think you've probably hit on the exact method."

"Nothing to it, Peter, my boy," he said, waving his hand. "My only pleasure in the sere and yellow of life comes from sitting around and working out these little puzzles. But may I suggest one thing?"

"Of course," I said.

"I would move most carefully, if I were you," he said. "I am told that the gentleman known as Phil Driscoll is inclined to be rough at times."

"I've been through some of those times," I said,

pointing to my face, which was still bruised. "But right now there's a beautiful murder frame right around my smiling face and the only way I can get it off is by finding out where it really belongs. I'll see you soon."

"Any time, Peter," he said. "It's nice of you to come around and brighten up the last days of a lonely old man."

I made a rude suggestion about what he could do with his self-pity and he was chuckling as I left. I went back out through the store and out to the car. I drove back over the MacArthur Causeway and turned left on Fifth Street. This time I parked right in front of the house. I checked the time. The races were still on so Jerry Morris was probably still busy in the room with all the equipment.

I walked up to the front door and knocked. I waited a minute, then knocked again, this time louder. After a moment, the door opened about three inches and he looked out. His face darkened as he recognized me.

"I told you I'm busy in the afternoons," he said. "You'll have to come back later." He started to close the door.

"Now," I said, putting my foot in the door. "I'm afraid that there's a small misunderstanding. My name isn't Fred Gilson. It's Pete Draco. I'm a private detective and I'm coming in—gently or roughly, whichever you prefer." I reached up and pulled the gun from its holster, holding it so he could see it but it couldn't be seen by anyone on the street.

He gave me a flat smile, but held the door open. I moved in, stepping quickly to one side so I could cover him.

"Anyone else here?" I asked.

"No one," he said, closing the door.

I could hear the murmur of a voice over the loudspeaker in the next room. "I hope," I said ironically, "that I'm not interfering with your work?"

"Not at all," he said. "There's nothing for me to do but be here in case something goes wrong." He studied me a moment. "So you're Pete Draco. How did you find me? Follow Jane here?"

I nodded. He looked at me appreciatively.

"You must be smarter than they thought. I warned them a couple of times that you were."

"You must be dumber than I thought," I said. "With all your fancy bugging, how come you didn't put a tap on my phone?"

"I did," he said calmly. "There's also two pickups in your apartment and one in your office. There's a locater on your car, but unfortunately it's been stationary since shortly after noon today."

"But if you did all that," I said, "then you must also have known that I wasn't working on anything that would lead to you."

"You were," he said, "as long as you were interested in the activities of my two partners."

"Urbino and Novelle?"

He nodded.

"The three of you and Jane Benedict are working for Driscoll, aren't you?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

"And you tried to put the two frames on me?"

"Driscoll did."

"What about Fontelli?" I asked. "Why was he killed?"

He smiled. "That was a smart move. Fontelli was sent down here by Donetti to find out who was raiding his bookies. We got to him and made him think you were involved and that if he picked a fight with you it might flush out whoever was backing you. Then we drugged him and took him to your apartment and killed him. That put a nice little frame around your neck and at the same time pointed the finger away from us as far as Donetti is concerned."

"It was Jane who fixed my lock so you could get in any time you wanted to?"

"That's right. She's a clever little girl."

"She is," I admitted. "At least you're being smart in being so cooperative."

He shrugged. "Why not? What are you going to do with the information?"

"Take you to the cops and let them unravel the rest of your scheme."

He smiled again. "I don't think so."

"What do you mean?"

"You have an answering service, don't you?"

"You probably know damn well I do. What of it?"

"Have you checked with them recently?"

"No. Why?"

"I suggest that you do," he said. He gestured across the room. "There's a phone. Go ahead and use it."

I looked around and spotted the phone. Then I backed up to it, holding the gun on him. I picked up the receiver and dialed the number.

"This is Pete Draco, honey," I said when the girl answered. "Any messages for me?"

"Just a minute," she said. She was gone no more than that. "There are two. A Mrs. Thorney called and wants you to call—"

"Never mind that one," I interrupted. "What else?"

"A man called. He said he was your Uncle Maxie. He said not to worry about Miss Siena as she was safely with him and would be staying until your vacation is over. . . . Are you going on a vacation, Mr. Draco?"

I put the phone down without answering her.

CHAPTER 10

JERRY MORRIS was standing across the room, grinning at me. For a moment I had the feeling that I ought to just pull the trigger and then worry about what it would mean. I could feel the muscle in my finger tightening. It was such an effort to relax it that my whole hand was gripped by a cramp. I stood there, staring back at him, and for a minute all I could think about was that they had Susan and that I had to get her back some way.

"A wonderful device," he said, "the telephone answering service. Don't you think so, Draco?"

"This is a wonderful device, too," I said thickly, waving the gun. "You flex your finger and where there was a man, suddenly there is nothing."

He got a little paler. "Can you imagine," he said quickly, "what Maxie will do to your girl friend if you do that?"

"I can imagine," I said. "That's the only reason I haven't already pulled the trigger."

Some of the tension went out of his face. "So run along, Draco. The ball has been taken away from you."

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe I've lost the ball, but I've still got the quarterback. What's the schedule in there with all your fancy gimmicks?"

He glanced at his watch. "The last race is on now. After that we shut down for the day."

"And then what do you do?"

"Depends on what I want to do."

"When is Jane coming back?"

"Probably tomorrow."

"Okay, sit down," I said.

He sat down in the nearest chair. "This is only going to buy you more trouble," he said. "Sooner or later, they will know you're trying to hold me and you'll be in worse trouble. Or rather Miss Siena will be."

"Who do you think you're kidding?" I asked. "I'm a big boy. If they've grabbed her, they're not going to let her go no matter what happens. We both know that. So there's nothing to lose."

"Sure there is. If you go take that vacation, they might let her go. If you keep sticking your nose in, you can be sure that something is going to happen to her."

"I'll take the chance," I said. The sound over the loudspeaker in the other room ceased. "Let's go in and shut that thing off. I'll be right behind you, so be careful. And don't say anything until we get back into this room. You might be able to tip somebody off, but it won't do you any good."

He got up and headed into the radio room without a word and I went close behind him. He leaned over and turned several knobs and a light on the panel went out. He looked at me and nodded. I motioned towards the living room and he turned and went back. I followed.

"I left the taps and the tape recorders on," he said when we were back in the living room. "That shouldn't bother you and we won't lose any valuable information."

"You seem to be pretty sure that you're going ahead."

"Of course," he said easily. "You don't really think that one man can stop a whole organization, do you?"

"He can try," I said. "You got anything to drink in the house?"

He nodded. "Gin, VO, some good Scotch and some bourbon."

"Break out the VO," I said.

"It's in the other room. The kitchen."

"Lead the way. I'll be with you."

He headed for the kitchen and I followed. He got a bottle from the cupboard, two glasses, then looked at me. "Water or soda?" he asked.

"Neither. When I want a tonic, I'll ask for it."

He went over to the refrigerater and got out some ice

and then we went back into the living room. He fixed the two drinks on the rocks and handed one of them to me.

"Sit down," I told him, indicating the chair across the room.

He did as I told him and I took a chair near the phone. I kept the gun on my lap.

"Make yourself comfortable," I told him. "We're going to stick around for a while."

"Why?" he asked.

"The cops are looking for me," I said. "I can't think of a better place to hide than with a man they haven't been able to find. Later, we'll take a little trip."

"I admire your nerve," he said, "but not your intelligence. What do you think you're going to accomplish?"

"We'll learn together," I told him. "Where have they got the girl?"

He shrugged.

"Then we'll make a stab at that together, too," I said.

So we sat there together, sipping our drinks and being very chummy, thanks to the gun in my lap. Finally it began to get dark outside.

"Okay," I told him. "It's time we got this show on the road. You're going to make a phone call."

"To whom?"

"Jane Benedict. At the Cannes Hotel. You know the spot where Driscoll's motorboats are moored?"

"Yes."

"Tell Jane that something has come up and she's to meet you there. Tell her you'll be waiting in the boat. Don't tell her anything else. Just remember I've already got a murder frame hanging over me and I don't have much to lose if I bump you off."

"Don't worry," he said. "I don't have to be a hero. You do." He crossed over to the phone, picked up the receiver and dialed the number.

"Miss Jane Benedict," he said. He waited a moment. "Jane? Jerry. Take a cab and meet me at the boats. Something has come up and we have to get over to the island. . . . No, it's nothing to worry about. I'll tell you all

about it as soon as I see you." He hung up.

"Satisfied?" he asked.

"You're a good boy," I said. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"To the motorboat."

He got up and started for the door, but when he reached it, he stopped and looked back at me. "Do you seriously think you can pull a one-man raid on the island?" he asked.

"Why not?" I said. "You know, the pure in heart. . . . Let's go. We don't want to disappoint Jane."

He went on through the door with me following close behind. We walked down to the car.

"You drive," I told him.

He slid behind the wheel and I got in next to him, still holding the gun on him. He started the motor and we took off. We turned up Alton Road and we went up north until we were opposite the Sunset Islands. We put the car into a parking lot and walked across to the Bay.

"You're an idiot," he said as we reached the boats.

"Sure," I said, "but charming."

We climbed down and I motioned him into the front of the boat. I sat at the rear where I could watch him and still see Jane when she arrived.

"Romantic, perhaps," he said. "You've been reading too many books. You can't buck an organization like this. Why don't you just go away on a vacation and stay healthy? This way only one thing can happen to you."

"You miss a very important point," I said. "I can't go away on a vacation. There's a murder rap hanging over my head—one engineered by Phil Driscoll. I can't run away from that. So I can't lose a thing. Besides, I don't like being pushed around. I was going along minding my own business, which was to try to solve a jewel theft, and your little friends started this. I'm going to finish it."

"I'll never understand a character like you," he said.

"Of course you won't," I said. "You're the kind of guy who will kiss anybody's ass as long as you can make a buck. I like a buck as well as you do, but I only like one kind of kissing—and Phil Driscoll isn't my

kind. If you understood a guy like me, you wouldn't be doing what you are—and you wouldn't be where you are right this minute."

"I won't be there long," he said confidently.

"You go to your church and I'll go to mine," I said. "Now, just shut up and sit there."

There was one good thing about him. He wasn't a hood so he did what he was told. We sat there in silence for maybe another five minutes and then a cab stopped up on Alton Road. The door slammed and the cab drove away. A shimmery figure walked down towards the boat. She hesitated as she reached it.

"Jerry?" she said.

"It's okay, honey," I said. "Come aboard and we can hoist gasoline—or whatever it is that one does with a motorboat."

She half-turned as though she was about to try to get away.

"Don't try it, honey," I said. "Even on high heels, you can't outrun a bullet. And I'm the kind of uncouth bastard who would shoot a girl."

She turned and came down to the dock and stepped aboard.

"Pete," she said uncertainly.

"It's lovely, isn't it?" I said. "Go ahead to the front of the boat and sit with your friend, Jerry."

She stepped past me and joined him in the front of the cockpit.

"Okay, Jerry," I said, "let's go—to Phil Driscoll's island."

He moved to the motor.

"What's the pitch, Jerry?" she asked.

"Young Lochinvar out of the north—27th Street, that is," he said. "Don't worry. We'll be out of this about fifty seconds after he lands on the island."

"Get going and have your dreams later," I told him.

He started the motor. As soon as it was going, I threw the mooring rope off and the boat swung away from the shore. Then it straightened out with a full-throated roar and headed out into the Bay.

Jerry Morris nosed the boat into the small dock at the island, edging it in between two other motorboats. He moored it and cut the motor.

"Now what, big man?" he asked. He sounded more confident now that we were at the island.

"You and Jane step out on land very carefully," I said, "and then stand side by side facing the house."

They obeyed me. Once they were out of the boat, I followed them. I stepped off the boat, directly behind them.

"Why don't you give up while you still can?" Jerry asked.

"Never heard the word," I said. I lifted the gun and slashed the barrel across the back of his head. He grunted and started to fold.

"Pete—" Jane began.

I shifted and hit her across the back of the head with the gun. She crumpled to the ground beside him.

I slipped the gun into its holster and knelt down beside them. I lifted him slightly and took his shirt off. I carefully tore it into strips. I used several of the strips to tie his hands and legs. I took his handkerchief from his pants pocket, rolled it into a ball and used another strip to tie it around his face as a gag. Then I turned to Jane. I stripped off her blouse and tore it into strips. I tied her arms and legs. Then I removed her brassiere—rationalizing it by the fact that I had already seen her breasts. I used it to gag her. Then I stood up and moved silently towards the house.

There was a light in a couple of rooms on the first floor and a light in the basement. I went around the side, the way I had gone with Maxie Layton and Jack Enoch. I reached the door that led into the basement. It was locked. I might have been able to pick the lock, but I didn't want to waste time. I had to figure that Driscoll would know that a boat had docked and would get suspicious if someone didn't show up quickly. I moved on to the window next to the door. It was locked, too.

I reached in my pocket and brought out a small roll of adhesive tape that I always carried with me. I tore

off a strip and put the roll in my pocket. I pressed one end of the strip firmly against the glass, then hit the glass a sharp blow with my fist. There was a tiny splintering sound and a hunk of glass broke out, but the adhesive tape kept it from falling to the floor. I drew it carefully out through the hole and placed it on the grass. I reached through the hole and unlocked the window. I pushed it open, crawled through and dropped gently to the basement floor. I went forward through the darkness towards the door where light spilled out through the crack at the bottom.

I reached the door and stopped. I leaned against it and listened.

"Boss," a voice said. It sounded like Jack Enoch. "That boat docked several minutes ago. Whoever was in it should be here by now."

"Okay," said another voice which I recognized as belonging to Phil Driscoll, "go outside and take a look around."

I drew my gun, turned the knob of the door and suddenly slammed it open.

"Nobody has to go anywhere," I said. "Just stay the way you are."

Phil Driscoll and Jack Enoch were standing on one side of the conference table. Neither one of them had a gun showing. On the table, there was a lady's bag, its contents spilled over the top. Across the table, Susan Siena stood. The top of her dress was torn in several places and there were three or four angry red welts across her face. Maxie Layton was standing in front of her, holding a short-handled whip in his hand. From the expression on his face, I could guess that he had been enjoying himself until he was surprised.

"Pete," Susan exclaimed. She sounded as if she were about to cry.

"It's okay, honey," I told her. "They won't do anything more to you."

"Pete, they kidnapped me," she said.

"I know."

"This won't accomplish anything, Draco," Phil Driscoll said. "The police are looking for you, you know."

"I know that, too," I said. "The funny thing is I've got the brains and the muscles of a racket I'm sure the police and a lot of other people would like. Maybe I can make a trade."

"You can still make a trade with me," Driscoll said.

"Not you," I told him. "It's much too late for that. I don't like anything about you. And all I want from you is a little blood. Yours."

That was my mistake. I should never have talked to him. Little Maxie Layton suddenly whipped into action. He grabbed Susan and pulled her in front of him. At the same time, he threw the whip at me and reached for his gun. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Phil Driscoll and Jack Enoch start to rush me.

I had to make a choice and make it quickly. I couldn't do anything about Maxie while he was behind Susan. I decided to ignore the whip. I whirled and snapped a shot at Jack Enoch. There really wasn't enough time. I saw the edge of his sleeve twitch and knew that I had only nicked him. Before I could fire again, Phil Driscoll was on me. His right hand slashed across my wrist and my gun dropped to the floor. He slammed a fist into my face. I staggered back, trying to get my arms up. Jack Enoch moved in on the other side of me and struck at me. I couldn't see what he hit me with, but it felt like a blackjack. My head rang and I went down.

"He's mine," I heard Maxie say. "I didn't get to finish with him before."

I wasn't paying too much attention. I was much busier trying to get to my feet before anything else happened. I didn't quite make it. I got my feet planted on the floor and was trying to straighten up when Maxie kicked. The point of his shoe caught me high on the right cheek and I catapulted back.

I hit the floor, rolling as hard as I could to get away from them. This time I made it. I got to my feet, feeling a little woozy, but triumphant over the fact that I was at least standing up. My gun was still on the floor where it had dropped. Phil Driscoll and Jack Enoch were standing back, watching. Maxie Layton was coming to-

ward me with mincing steps, like a cat. He was carrying his gun in his right hand.

"Thanks for coming, sucker," he said. "I've been hoping for a day like this."

I wasn't going to waste any time talking just then. I watched him carefully. When he swung, I ducked in under it and hit him in the short ribs. I could hear his breath rushing out and felt pleased that I'd hurt him. But my pleasure didn't last long. He recovered quickly and swung the gun backhanded before I could get my balance again. The barrel of the gun cracked against the side of my head. The only thing I could think as I went down was that it hurt.

This time I didn't make it up. He was beside me and his foot smashed into my side. The sound that I heard came from me. He kicked me twice more in the same place. Then he quickly bent over and the barrel of his gun raked across my face. I guessed that it hurt, for I could feel the sudden rush of warm blood across my cheek, but my ribs were hurting so badly that I didn't really feel it. I was fighting to hold on to consciousness.

As though from a great distance, I heard a grunt of pain from someone else. Then there was a thud of something hitting the floor.

"Pete," Susan called. Her voice, too, sounded as if it were coming from a long way off. There was an urgency in it.

At the same time, I became aware that Maxie wasn't hitting me. With an effort, I raised my head and brought my eyes into focus. Maxie wasn't hitting me because he had his gun lifted.

"I'll fix the bitch," he muttered.

Then I realized that he was intending to shoot Susan, although I didn't understand why. There was no time to find out the reason. I reached out and grabbed his ankle and heaved with all my strength. The pain almost made me pass out, but I realized I was being successful. I could feel his leg give as he started to fall. I gave him a final push as he went over, then turned and began to scramble across the floor toward where my gun was. There was no time to find out what was going on.

I reached the gun, then finally looked up. Phil Driscoll was on the floor and seemed to be unconscious. Jack Enoch seemed to have been heading for Susan, but had turned and was bringing his gun out. I aimed carefully and put a bullet through his shoulder. As he spun to the floor, I pushed myself around on the floor to look at Maxie.

He had already gotten to his feet and his gun was pointing at me. I could almost see his finger tightening on the trigger. There wasn't too much time, but this time I didn't hurry as I aimed my gun.

His went off first. I felt something tug at my left shoulder and the arm became numb. It threw my aim off for a few seconds, but that was all. I got it back on target and squeezed the trigger lovingly. My bullet went through his left kneecap and he went down, screaming.

"I've been saving that one for you, sweetheart," I told him.

Maxie was tough. I had to give him that. He held on to his gun as he went down and he started trying to lift and aim it despite the agony from his knee. I aimed and put a second bullet through his right kneecap. This time, he fainted, the gun dropping from his hand.

I turned back to the room. Driscoll was still out. So was Jack Enoch. From the way he was lying, it looked as if he might have also hit his head on the table as he went down. His shoulder was all bloody but so was the side of his head.

Susan Siena was still standing where I'd last seen her, a handkerchief held in her hand. She looked as if she were in a slight state of shock.

I got slowly and painfully to my feet. This time it felt as if something was broken in my side. My left shoulder was beginning to hurt. My face was still bleeding. I wiped some of the blood off with my coat sleeve. I put my gun back into the holster and staggered over to the wall. I reached up and ripped a drape down. I tore it into six strips. I staggered back across the floor and tied Maxie's hands. I didn't have to tie his legs. Then I went over and tied up Driscoll and Jack Enoch. I had to rest then for a moment.

I looked at Susan. She was still standing in the same position. I wanted desperately to go to her, but there was still one more thing to do. I went over to the conference table and picked up the phone. I dialed the number of the police department and asked for Lieutenant Weston.

"Pete Draco," I said when he came on.

"Where the hell are you?" he roared. "You gave me your word you were coming to see the D.A. That was hours ago. The police department has been searching all over the city for you. And what the hell do you think you've done to me?"

"Hold it," I said. "I told you that I would come in to see the D.A. as soon as I could. I haven't been able to. In the meantime, I've got something for you."

"What? It better be good."

"It is. You know where Phil Driscoll's island is?"

"Yes."

"All right. Get to it as soon as you can. You will find a man and a girl on the beach tied up. Inside the house, in the basement, you will find Phil Driscoll, Jack Enoch and Maxie Layton tied up. Jack and Maxie are badly wounded so you better hurry before they bleed to death. They are all involved in a scheme to take over the bookies and wire services in Florida. They also killed Fontelli, although I don't know which one did it."

"You drunk?" he asked.

"No. I wish I were. I'm giving it to you straight. I'll tell you the details later—including a whole short-wave radio set-up on Fifth Street—but now just get here quickly."

"Where are you?"

"At Driscoll's house at the moment. I shot Enoch and Layton, if that's what you're wondering about."

"All right. Stay there."

"No," I said. "I'll see you later."

"Pete—"

I hung up the phone and went around the table to Susan. I picked up her things from the table and put them in her purse. I reached out and took the handkerchief from her hand. I got a surprise. The handkerchief was

heavy. At first, I couldn't figure it out. Then I realized there was a ball of lead in one corner of it, half the size of a golf ball. I stared at it stupidly for a minute before I realized that that was what'd happened to Phil Driscoll. I put the handkerchief into the bag.

"Come on, honey," I said. "It's all over and we have to get out of here."

She shuddered, then turned to look at me. Slowly, her eyes came into focus.

"Pete," she said. "Pete, did I kill him?"

"Driscoll?" I asked. "No, honey, you just knocked him out. Come on. We have to get out of here before the cops come."

She picked up her bag and obediently went with me out of the room. We went up through the door and out of the house. Jerry Morris and Jane Benedict were making noises as we went past them and got into the motorboat. I started it up, backed away from the dock and then headed it for the shore.

"That was some little trick with the handkerchief, honey," I said to Susan. "Where did you pick it up?"

"My father," she said. "When I was fifteen he gave me such a handkerchief, telling me that it was not always safe for a young girl walking about in New York. I've carried one ever since then."

"Well, it certainly worked on Driscoll," I said, "which should prove that papa was right."

A few minutes later, I brought the motorboat safely into the dock. We climbed out and walked up to the car. It was a painful trip. Every breath I took was like a knife stab. But we finally made it.

"Will you drive, honey?" I asked.

She slipped in under the wheel and I handed her the key. She started the motor and pulled out of the parking lot. As we went up Alton, we could hear a police siren somewhere back of us.

I leaned against the back of the front seat and tried to think. I had never felt worse in my life. My face and the side of my head were like a gigantic toothache and my side was even worse. But something was nagging at my mind and I couldn't push it out.

We arrived at the Hapsburg and got out, turning the car over to one of the boys. We went through the lobby to the elevators. Everybody stared at my blood-streaked face, but nobody said anything.

I followed Susan meekly down the hall to her room and then into it.

"Sit there," she ordered. I sat and she went into the bathroom. She came back right away with a hot towel and began, gently, to clean off my face. As gentle as she was, every touch hurt.

"Poor darling," she said. "It doesn't look good. I think we'd better call a doctor."

"Not yet," I said. I suspected that my nose was broken and several ribs on my left side, but that would have to wait. "Look at my shoulder."

She pulled my coat and shirt back and down over the shoulder. There was a long red furrow across the muscle. I squinted down at it as she carefully sponged off the dried blood. It hurt.

"Got a drink around?" I asked.

"No," she said. But she went immediately to the phone and told room service to send up a double martini. Then she came back to finish cleaning my wound.

A waiter arrived with my drink and managed not to look at me while she signed the check. Then he was gone. Susan brought me the drink and stared at my face.

"I'm sorry you got those saving me," she said, "but thank you." She leaned over and kissed me on the mouth. Her lips were warm and sweet. They almost erased the pain, but they also started a new pain.

"I must be a mess," she said. "Will you excuse me while I freshen up a bit?"

"Go ahead," I mumbled. "I just want to sit and rest for a moment. Then I'll be all right."

She went into the bathroom and shut the door. I took a stiff drink of the martini and stared around the room. Painfully, I got to my feet and went to the closet. I opened the door and looked inside. Some clothes were hanging there and her matched luggage was on the top

shelf. Nothing else. I reached up and dragged the luggage down, one at a time. Then I had to sit down for a minute. I could hear the water splashing in the bathroom. I took another drink and went back to the luggage.

I hit the jackpot when I opened the largest suitcase. It was filled with jewelry. Pawing through it, I recognized a couple of pieces I had seen before. I closed the suitcase and placed it against the wall.

I went back to sit down, pulling the phone over to me. I made one call. Lieutenant Weston wasn't back yet but I left a message for him. I waited a few minutes, then lifted the receiver again and asked the operator for the house detective.

"This is Draco," I said when he came on. "The cops call you yet?"

"Yes," he said.

"Come on up," I said. I put the receiver down and picked up the martini. I drained it.

She came out of the bathroom, wearing some sort of wrap and looking beautiful. She came over to me.

"How do you feel, darling?" she asked.

"I'll live," I said. "What more can I say?"

She leaned down to kiss me again. It was a long kiss and I tried to enjoy every minute of it.

"What do we do now?" she asked when it was over. "Want me to drive you to the doctor?"

I shook my head. "It's time for both of us to get fixed up, but we won't be able to do it together. I'm sorry."

She stared at me for a couple of minutes. "You know?" she asked finally.

I nodded.

"How?" she asked almost in a whisper.

"The handkerchief," I said. "The perfect lady's blackjack. A wispy, linen handkerchief with a ball of lead sewed into one corner. That and the memory that Thorney was killed with a similar weapon. The police lab even found linen threads in the wound. When you were in the bathroom, I looked through your suitcases."

For the first time, she looked toward the closet and

saw the suitcases arranged against the wall.

"It's funny," I said. "All along I've been thinking how wonderful it would be when I finished this case and you and I could spend more time together. Well—the case is finished. . . ."

"But we don't have to be," she said. She came back and put her arms around my neck. "Pete, you and I can take the jewels and live on them a long time. There's over a million dollars' worth there. We can go to Europe."

"Why did you do it?" I asked.

"Because I didn't have enough of an income to live on and I couldn't bear the thought of going to work. And it was so easy. I've been doing it for years and no one ever suspected me."

"And the killing—was that easy, too?"

"No. Of course not. But I had to do it. He came in and recognized me. I didn't have any choice. . . . Pete, we *can* go to Europe."

"No," I said. "I get seasick on boats." There was a knock on the door. "Go open the door, honey."

Her arms lingered for a second around my neck, then withdrew. She walked woodenly across the room and opened the door. The house detective came in, looking around.

"Is this on the level, Draco?" he asked.

"The cops called you, didn't they?"

"Yeah. . . ."

"Well, be sure that you believe it's enough on the level not to let her get away before they get here. That large suitcase is full of the jewelry."

He was staring at me. "She do that to you?"

"No," I said. "What she did to me doesn't show." I stood up and started to walk across the room.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Out," I said. "Just out. It's much too crowded in here and I can't stand crowds." I walked on out through the door, closing it behind me, without looking back. I took the elevator downstairs and walked through the lobby to the door. The doorman opened it for me. I was

grateful. I wasn't sure that I could have opened it by myself.

"Can I get a cab for you, sir?" he asked.

"No," I said. "No cabs. But I think you might call an ambulance." I was aware of the sidewalk tilting, then coming up to meet me—and that was the last thing I remembered.

CHAPTER 11

AT FIRST, I didn't know where I was, but it was nice. I was still hurting, but not as badly. I didn't worry about anything for a minute but just enjoyed the comfort. Then, finally, I opened my eyes. I was in a hospital room. Just then the door opened and a pretty nurse came in.

"Well," she said cheerfully, "it's about time you were coming around."

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Ten-thirty."

"Night or morning?"

"Night. You were brought in about an hour ago."

"How am I doing?"

"Fine. You have a bullet wound in your left shoulder, four broken ribs, a broken nose and a few minor contusions. Otherwise, you're in perfect health. By the way, a Lieutenant Weston called and said to take good care of you. And you have a visitor. No more than five minutes, though." She went out.

A moment later the door opened and Katherine Thorney came into the room on tiptoe. I thought of closing my eyes and pretending to be asleep but she had already seen me staring at her.

"Pete," she said, "are you all right?"

"Sure," I said. "How did you know I was here?"

"The police told me. They also told me that, thanks to you, they had recovered my jewelry. It seems so impossible to believe that Susan Siena did that terrible thing."

"She did it," I said.

"I tried to call you this morning," she said.

"I know," I said. Had it really been that morning? It seemed so far away.

"I wanted to tell you something. That's why I had to come and see you here. I've been a very foolish woman, Pete."

"How's that?" I asked, looking at her with interest.

"You may not believe it, but I loved my husband very much. I hope that he knew it. But I was frightened at the idea of getting old and I started flirting with men because it made me feel younger. I guess maybe that wasn't so bad, but it was when I wanted you to pay attention to me right after Frank was dead. I wanted you to understand."

"I do," I said. "Anybody might do it. Forget about it."

"And I wanted to thank you, too," she said. "I'm going back to New York in the morning. Now, I must go. The nurse said I mustn't stay long."

She came over and put something on the table beside my bed. "Good-bye, Pete," she said and was gone before I could even answer. I looked at what she'd put on the stand. It was a check. For five thousand dollars. An interesting amount. I put it back on the table.

It was about a half hour later when the door opened and the nurse looked in again. "Lieutenant Weston is here," she said.

He came into the room and looked at me. "You're not as pretty as you were the last time I saw you," he said.

"You're not my type, either," I told him. "Did you come around to arrest me?"

"No. I came to hear your story."

So I told him all I knew about Driscoll's racket and gave him the address of the short-wave radio station.

"We probably can't do much about the racket except stop it," he said, "but Morris and the girl have both talked and we've got Maxie booked for murdering Fontelli. I don't think there'll be any problem in getting a conviction. So you're in the clear on that."

"Thanks," I said. "I still don't get why they dumped him in my place."

"It wasn't the brightest thing Driscoll ever did," he admitted, "but it just might have bought him the time

he wanted if we'd arrested you at once. He was out to get you from the beginning. First, you did work on the bugging for Westmore Stables so he thought you were after him then. And when you showed up at the same party with three of his people and afterward started asking them questions, he was positive of it. He thought the jewelry investigation was just a cover-up. Then Fontelli showed up in town to investigate for his boss. Driscoll knew that Fontelli would soon get suspicious of him. He could have just killed Fontelli but New York would have wanted some explanation. So he made Fontelli suspicious of you and set up that public fight. Then he had Maxie murder Fontelli and dump the body on you. He was actually more interested in convincing his gangster friends in New York that you had killed Fontelli than in convincing us."

"Nice," I said. "And Susan Siena?"

"We picked her up right after you left. All the jewelry was there—from the series of robberies. She admits the whole thing, including the murder of Thorney. So I owe you a vote of thanks on both cases."

"Sure," I said. "It's a great life, isn't it, Dick?"

"Sometimes it is," he said gravely. He walked over and looked at the check on the table. "I'm glad she gave you that," he said. "I was hoping she would."

"Why?" I asked, surprised.

"One thing I forgot to tell you," he said. "The D.A. is still angry about you not showing up and about concealing evidence. He's had your license suspended for ninety days. I'll see you around, Pete."

The door closed gently behind him. Then the pretty nurse came in and I forgot about the whole thing.

THE END
of an Original Gold Medal Novel by
Richard Foster

She was lying on her stomach, on my couch.

She had bright red hair and she was something to look at.

All of her. She was completely naked.

She heard me come in and rolled over on her side to look up at me. "Why, honey," she said, "that's a hell of a way to greet a girl—with a gun."

She was right. That was a hell of a way to greet a girl.

I put away the gun.

I greeted her properly.

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